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## AVALANCHE ALF, THE FOOT-HILLS GUIDE; Or, The Snow-Prisoners of Colorado.

BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN,

AUTHOR OF "SANCHO PEDRO, THE BOY BANDIT," "REDTOP RUBE," "LEADVILLE NICK," ETC., ETC.



AVALANCHE ALF RECOGNIZED THE VICTIM OF THE SNOW-SLIDE TO BE THE MUTINEER CHIEF.



# Avalanche Alf,

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OR,  
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BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN,  
AUTHOR OF "DURANGO DAVE," "TOMBSTONE TOM," "BRIMSTONE BOB," "REDTOP RUBE,"  
"SANCHO PEDRO," ETC.

### CHAPTER I.

#### AVALANCHE ALF'S WARNING.

"Who's the captain of this outfit?"  
"I'm ther man."  
"Are you sure?"  
"Sure! Ain't I said so? I reckon so, an' what I sez goes as it lays. D'ye mean ter call me a liar?"

"Not at all, but it's my experience that when a party has gray-headed men in it they don't usually make a— a young man leader. But I intended no offense."

"Wal, you've gi'n offense, an' ther quicker you git away from hyar ther safer it'll be fur you. I'm Steve Williams, ther untamed unicorn, an' I ain't safe ter fool with. Did you hear me tell you ter git up an' dust?"

"I heard you, but I see no reason for going. This country is free to all, and I have no desire to fasten myself on your party. I'm able to care for myself. All I ask is a talk with some of the older men, and then I'll bid you good-day."

"You'll bid me good-day now; ef you don't, I'll make it a bad day fur you. Clear out!"

This animated conversation was maintained between two youths who stood in a valley among the mountains of Colorado. He who had called himself Steve Williams was a stoutly-built young fellow of about nineteen; a young man with a form to challenge any one's admiration. Further than that, admiration was not likely to go. He had a coarse, brutal face, and looked like a good representative of the Western rough.

The second person was younger, being not more than seventeen. He, too, had a good form for one of his years, and his face was bold, frank and honest. He seemed the opposite of Steve in character, and one likely to make a favorable impression among all honest people.

The scene, as before said, was a valley in the Colorado mountains. The open space was shaped like a horseshoe, and on three sides the hills arose with a rough, rocky slope. Down the middle of the valley rippled a small stream, which had its source among the rocks at the valley's head.

Nine log cabins were visible. Of these, all were comparatively small except one. This was considerably larger and appeared to be a store-house.

Such was the scene upon which the younger of the two characters already introduced had chanced, and a brief survey was enough to tell him two things. First, that the people who inhabited the valley were miners; secondly, that they were in danger.

It was to warn them that he had gone forward, but his opening interview was not one calculated to encourage him in his good work, and trouble would surely have ensued had not another actor appeared upon the scene.

A gray-haired man of fifty-five years had heard the sound of Steve's angry voice, and he came forward with a frown on his face.

"What's ther matter here?"

His voice was stern, but the young stranger saw that it was at Steve he looked, and he was not slow to interpret it as being a rebuke to that imperious young fellow.

"I observed that I wished to speak with the leader of this outfit, and this man ordered me away," he quickly explained.

"He did, eh? Steve Williams, you are too free with your tongue, by a good 'eal. Take care, or I'll resent your interference one o' these days. Young man, I'm Buck Rainer, captain o' these miners, an' I'm ready ter hear what you hev ter say."

The elder man's voice had been sharp when addressing Steve, but as he turned again to the stranger, it changed to a kindly tone and the latter was at once favorably impressed.

"What I want, captain, is to ask you if you are aware you are in danger here?"

Rainer looked steadily at the youth.

"Danger from what?" he asked.

"A veteran like you must be aware that this

is one of the worst places in the Rockies when the snow comes."

"So I do, but ther snow ain't come yit."

"It will be here in less than two days, and in such a quantity that it will be next to impossible to get to the towns."

Steve Williams, who had been smarting under his rebuff, broke into a derisive laugh.

"Hyar's another weather-prophet, an' he ain't fairly out o' his cradle yet!"

"Be still!" said Buck Rainer, authoritatively. "Young stranger, why do you think that? The season is mild, an' though I admit it is past ther time when we usually git our snows, I kin see no sign o' a change at present—and I am a gray-headed old man."

The last statement was a suggestion that he was older by far than the youth who had warned him, but it was so kindly and considerately made that the visitor was encouraged to speak further and freely.

"I hope you won't laugh at me, but I am a good deal of a weather-prophet. Perhaps one reason is that, when only six years of age, I made my first appearance among those who know me now by coming down a mountain on a snow-slide which spared only me out of a party of six. My name is Alfred Browning, but ever since that time I have been called Avalanche Alf."

"Avalanche Alf?" Rainer echoed.

"Yes, sir."

"I've heerd o' you, an' heerd it said you are one o' ther most remarkable young fellers in Colorado."

"That is the flattery of my friends, of course. But, as I was about to add, I have other reasons for being a weather-prophet. Ten years of my life have been passed among the Colorado mountains, and for eight years of that time I was the daily companion of an aged hermit who certainly was a remarkable weather-prophet. He gave me all the points he could, and I have not failed to profit by them."

Steve had listened with a sneer; Rainer with thoughtful attention.

"An' you prophesy snow now?" the latter asked.

"I do, and that, too, one of the greatest snows Colorado has ever seen. It is my opinion that if you are caught here, then you will be snow-bound for the winter."

Williams laughed sarcastically.

"Captain, this 'ere is too thin for sensible men, ain't it? I reckon you know better than any kid."

"Ther prophecy only confirms what my better judgment tells me. Winter has held off a good 'eal longer than usual, an' we hev lingered here because we was gittin' gold plentifully, but ther old heads ain't had ther confidence o' ther young ones."

The veteran looked carefully at the sky, mentally analyzed the air, and then added:

"Still, I don't see any signs o' immediate snow."

"It'll be here in less than forty-eight hours!" confidently affirmed Avalanche Alf.

Williams came in like a chorus with his sneers, but the captain cut him short by inviting Alf to accompany him to his cabin. He had so often heard of the youth, who had such a reputation for knowledge of the foot-hills that he was always in demand as a guide, and was not sorry to have the chance to welcome him to the Horseshoe, as the camp was familiarly called.

Rainer was a miner of long experience, and those who knew him and his capability had for some years made a practice of enrolling themselves in a regular band and following his lead in search of the yellow dust their hearts craved.

The party at present under his command was composed of twenty men, all told, but the exact number of the outfit was increased to twenty-two by the presence of a woman and a girl.

The latter was Betha Rainer, the captain's daughter. She was fifteen years old and the pride of the camp. Without being forward or bold, she was social and fearless, and no one could say he had ever had aught but kind words from her. The miners had a fancy that she brought them good luck, and she certainly made a bright feature in their life so remote from the regular towns of the young State.

The woman was Miss Violet Rainer, sister of Captain Buck. She was more of a cloud than sunshine, but was a good woman at heart and had the honor of refusing about half the marriageable men of the party when they laid their hearts, picks and gold-dust at her feet.

The Horseshoe was situated in a very remote part of the foot-hills; indeed, Rainer believed

they were on ground never before even prospected. They had reached it late in the season, for the winter's snow held on tenaciously, but since work was begun, all had gone well and the yield of gold was unusually large.

During the fall the weather had been milder than usual, and they had been so reluctant to leave that they had remained when Captain Buck's judgment told him they ought to be going. Once caught in that region in a heavy snow-fall, there was no certainty that they would see the towns before spring, and to winter there might bring not only hardship but death to the whole party.

Thus it was that, when Avalanche Alf came with his warning, Rainer had listened so seriously.

### CHAPTER II.

#### THE MUTINEERS.

CAPTAIN RAINER was not in the least disposed to make light of Avalanche Alf's warning, but it was less that he was seriously impressed than that he really wished to make the acquaintance of a remarkable youth of whom he had often heard, that he was inviting him to his cabin. With the knowledge Alf possessed of Colorado places and ways, he was more to be regarded as a veteran than a boy.

When they reached Buck's humble home, no one was in save the elder Miss Rainer, and the captain took Alf aside and talked with him seriously. His object was to test the youth's visible mental ability so far as possible, and the result convinced him that he had not been over-estimated.

While they talked Miss Violet was preparing supper, and she had just announced that it was ready when Rainer's daughter entered.

Betha was a very pretty girl. She was small of her age, but the outdoor life she had led had given her the best of health, and she was plump and red-cheeked. Bright eyes gleamed from under clustering masses of black curls, and Alf was rather dazzled at first; but as he saw no good reason for being timid, his acquaintance with the young lady was soon favorably begun.

Captain Buck was more silent than usual during the meal, but he was thinking deeply, and the result of his thoughts was made known when they were through.

"Suppose we go out fur awhile, Alf," he suggested. "Ther men are all in by this time, an' I want ter lay a proposition afore them. I deem it right proper that we should start fur ther settlements as soon as we can, an' ef you'll go along, I want your voice in the matter."

"What if they meet me as Steve Williams did?"

"They won't; leastwise, none o' ther men will. We hev a few headstrong young chaps in ther party who think they know more about ther West than any other livin' creetur, but when a man gits a beard raised he is generally ready ter listen ter reason—or ought ter be. So fur ez Steve's horsetile demonstrations went, I reckon thar ain't a man in this party will repeat them when I've explained that you're my guest."

The veteran's manner was plain and simple, but Alf was observing enough to know that he could be as firm as a rock when his mind was fully made up.

They went out together, and Rainer at once proceeded to call the men together. This was not difficult, for they had just been disposing of their supper and had not had time to leave the camp.

Rainer came to business at once, and advised that gold-seeking be abandoned for the season. The very fact that the weather had been so mild at the season was proof enough that it was time to leave. Usually the ground was snow-covered at that time of year. He ended by mentioning Avalanche Alf's warning, and reminded them that the vicinity was notoriously the worst in Colorado during the winter season. If they were caught there, hardship and deaths were pretty sure to result.

The elder men of the party listened with grave attention, but Avalanche Alf, secretly watching Steve Williams, saw him sneer and mock Rainer, much to the amusement of two or three fellows he had gathered around him.

"Now, then, men, let it be a vote," said the captain. "All who are in favor o' pullin' up stakes an' leavin', lift up yer hands."

Thirteen men raised their right hands.

"It seems ter be a vote," Buck added.

But Steve Williams started forward.

"Mebbe you didn't see that me an' five o' my



pards didn't swing our fists," he pompously observed.

"On ther contrary, I *did* see it!" Buck calmly replied.

"Wal, we're opposed ter leavin' so soon."

"Six on ye?"

"Yas. Me an' Wilson, Ryder, Pratt, Orton an' Drake."

"Exactly, but whar twenty votes are cast, fourteen goes ahead o' six. Tom Wilson, I didn't think ter see a man o' *your* years so blind ter reason."

"I'm open ter reason," said Tom, sulkily, "but what's ther use o' bein' skeered? Did you ever see finer weather? It may hang on fur another month."

"Did you ever know it ter hang on till that time in ther Colorado foot-hills?"

"That's no sign but 'twill now."

"It's ther best o' signs. We never had tropic weather all winter hyar, and we never will. Prudence requires us ter leave while we can."

"But think o' ther gold we'll lose."

"I reckon nobody will mine it durin' ther winter, an' in ther spring we kin come hyar ag'in."

Buck united a persuasive manner to his good sense, but he was talking to foolishly stubborn men. They were the worst of the company—though not known to be vicious—in that they were reckless and independent when they should be submissive, and old friends of Steve Williams. This young fellow had a fascinating way with men of his own class, and after his trouble with Alf he had gone among the men and stirred up a mutiny which would never have occurred but for him.

A long argument followed. Rainer was anxious to convince the rebels, for the company was bound together by more than fellowship—they were joint sharers in the profits of the gold-digging enterprise—and any division would make it unpleasant.

Avalanche Alf closely watched the mutineers, and he soon saw Williams address Tom Wilson secretly, as though to avoid notice from Rainer. Soon after Tom took occasion to speak, and he said he had no wish to be stubborn; that the captain might be right; and that he and his friends would like an hour in which to decide on the matter.

His sudden change of base, after what had been seen from Steve, struck Alf as being suspicious, but Captain Buck hailed it heartily and the meeting was dissolved with the understanding that Tom should report to the leader when his decision was made.

Alf and his host walked homeward, and Buck expressed the opinion that they should get away from the Horseshoe within thirty-six hours. He argued that the mutineers would surely listen to reason and be willing to save their own lives.

The young guide had no means of knowing as to that, though he suspected there was mischief in Steve Williams's head. That lawless young fellow evidently resented Alf's appearance among them, and already hated him, and there was no knowing what he might do.

Alf sincerely hoped that the entire party would be guided by the dictates of reason, however. He felt sure a heavy snow-fall would come within three days, and after that it would be almost impossible to gain the mining-towns. As has been said, the region was considered the worst in Colorado during the snow season; no one thought of trying to stir there after the ground was once covered.

Not only did the snow descend in great quantities, but the numerous canyons and clefts in the earth soon filled to the level through action of the wind, and, before men learned to avoid the district, numerous accidents had occurred because of them.

Again, it was pre-eminently the region of snow-slides, and Colorado had learned by sad experience to dread these upheavals.

Rainer and Alf went to the cabin, and a general conversation ensued, in which Betha and the elder Miss Rainer took part.

At the appointed time Tom Wilson and Zeke Drake appeared, and without any unnecessary talk they announced that they were convinced of the wisdom of Buck's advice, and that the entire party would be ready to go at the hour when he said they were ready.

Rainer was delighted, and from that time his cheerfulness did not abate until—well, the sequel will speak for itself.

It was then Monday evening, and it was arranged that they should start Wednesday morning. They would be busy all of the following day getting ready for departure, for there was a good deal to be done.

Avalanche Alf was still uneasy, for he feared the storm might be ahead of them, but as dismal prophecies would do no good he kept silent and let Rainer plan for himself.

The youth was given quarters in the cabin that night, for Buck had asked him to act as their guide to the nearest town. Any of the party could find the way, but none knew the best paths as did the young mountaineer.

The night passed without incident, and another day, which was a busy one, dawned upon the Horseshoe. The miners were busy all day. Their tools were stored, and their gold and such effects as they wished to carry away put in shape for transportation on their horses.

When darkness again fell nothing remained to be done except to load the animals and move.

Alf had divided his time during the day in three ways. He had helped the men, talked with Betha, whom he was learning to admire, and watched the signs of earth and air. From these he found fresh ground for fear; the case had assumed the form of a regular race with the approaching snow-storm.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE MIDNIGHT STAMPEDE.

THE camp in the Horseshoe was soon quiet and to all appearances its members were asleep. Alf were not so, however; Avalanche Alf found it difficult to compose himself. It was not the excitement of the time that impressed him, however, for he was accustomed to adventure and thrilling scene.

To speak more definitely, he thought not of the projected removal, as such, but of the women, especially of Betha. If they were really overtaken by the storm, the journey would be one of hardship and suffering, when even strong men would find it hard to retain life on the rocky trail.

After some time he fell asleep, but at the end of an hour awoke. He at once looked out of the window. The sky was covered with clouds and he shook his head doubtfully as he went back to bed. It would not be strange if the ground was white by morning.

He found it impossible to sleep, so he arose and left the cabin, his object being to go to the higher ground and see if he could gain a better idea of the weather.

This he did, and the result convinced him eight hours would see the vanguard of the storm at the Horseshoe. This would give the party about two hours start, but they would be overtaken on the road and then the battle would begin. After some deliberation he decided to arouse Rainer and advocate an immediate start. True, the trail was rough and dangerous by night, because of the chasms by the way, but it would be equally bad by day when these had filled with light snow.

Acting on this idea he quickly descended to the valley, and was on his way to Rainer's cabin when several dark forms loomed up ahead of him. Despite the darkness, he recognized men and horses, and believing Captain Buck had already moved, he was hurrying forward when a jet of flame shot up from beside the ground and a bullet whizzed past his head.

It had been a revolver shot, and an evident attempt on his life, and he wheeled indignantly toward the source from which it came.

The would-be assassin was invisible, but an adjacent cabin showed where he had gone, and the youth drew his own six-shooter and darted around the corner after him.

It was risky work, but his blood was up and he did not heed it.

He turned the corner without seeing any one, however, and, just then, there was a rattling of hoofs and the horses dashed down the valley at a gallop. Alf saw two men upon their backs, while the animals seemed to be divided into two parties, and it flashed upon him that it was a stampede.

He shouted to the men to stop, but they only increased their speed, and he raised his revolver and fired four shots in the air in rapid succession. Whoever were on the horses, he did not believe Captain Buck knew of their movements, and it was well to alarm the camp.

Then he started in pursuit, but, almost at the first step, he struck his foot against a stone and fell, and when he was up the horses were just disappearing down the valley.

By this time the miners were pouring out of the cabins; their promptness of movement indicating that there had been other light sleepers in the camp; and Alf soon singled out the form of Buck Rainer.

"Have you ordered out the horses?" he asked.

"Ordered out the horses? Sart'inly not. Why?" demanded the half-clad miner.

"Then somebody else has; they have just gone down the valley pell-mell, with men on their backs. I suspected mischief and a stampede, and fired my revolver to arouse you."

"It's ther durned Injuns!" said a voice from the crowd.

Buck did not answer the suggestion, for the Indians had never before troubled them, but the fact that the horses were gone was enough to arouse him to action. They must be recovered, or there would be no means of getting out of the mountains.

He hurriedly directed four of his best men to remain and guard the women, and then away went all the others in pursuit with him at their head.

Alf kept beside him and hurriedly told all that had occurred, and it was clear that some enemy had dealt them an unexpected and serious blow. Possibly their lives depended on recovering the horses.

But when they reached the lower end of the Horseshoe there was nothing to guide them. The horses had disappeared, and not a sound arose to guide them further. In the darkness, trailing was out of the question, and the miners could only take the course the thieves seemed the most likely to follow with their booty, and hurry on as before.

But it was in vain. The horses had disappeared as though by magic, and they gave up the attempt after awhile, and stood in a group, gloomy and uncertain.

"Boyees, what d'ye advise?" Rainer asked.

No one answered.

"Shall we try furdur?"

"Thar don't seem no use," one of his best men confessed.

"In the mornin' we kin foller the trail," another added.

Avalanche Alf glanced at the lowering sky.

"If the snow don't prevent," he added.

Rainer started.

"Do ye r'ally fear that?" he asked.

"I'm afraid the ground will be white in a very few hours."

"Ef 'tis, we're gone up," said one of the miners.

"It's dark enough fur it," said Buck, "an' I reck' we may ez wal put in another half-hour o' huntin'. Ef ther hosses is gone, an' we do git caught in a big snow, may ther Lord look out fur Betha!"

He thought only of her. He was a stout man, and accustomed to peril, but the daughter he loved so well was little fitted for what seemed in prospect.

The additional search was made, but it resulted as had the first, and they were obliged to return unsuccessful to the camp. A gloom had fallen on the entire party, for no one ventured to assert that there was no danger of snow. One look overhead was enough to convince them all; they could only hope they would be given a reprieve.

Avalanche Alf was trying to account for the stampede. The men were generally of the opinion that it was the work of Indians, but Alf did not believe it. The men on the horses had looked like whites, and the former theory received little attention from him.

He had a suspicion in his mind, but hesitated to mention it even to Rainer. Of himself, however, he asked the question: Had Steve Williams and his friends been concerned in the affair? From the first he had doubted their good faith when they yielded to the proposition of breaking camp, after opposing it so strongly, and though it did not seem that any men in their right senses would deliberately doom themselves to imprisonment by the snow, he could not get rid of the idea that Steve knew more than he told.

During the search that young fellow had been active enough, but it might be only a pretense, and Alf regretted, now it was too late, that he had not counted the miners at the beginning of the pursuit and made sure they were all there.

No one thought of trying to get more sleep, and Buck had just suggested to Alf to go out alone for another attempt when one of the men asked to see the captain privately.

They went aside, and the man abruptly began:

"I've got a word ter say, Buck, which I opine will go ag'in' your own views, but—"

"Speak, it, Saul. Opinions is what I want, not echoes o' what I say. Speak out!"

"Wal, then, I hev my doubts about your young friend."

"What friend?"

"Avalanche Alf."



"What about him?" Rainer asked, in surprise. "I regard his comin' ter ther camp an' ther disappearance o' ther hosses ez coincidental, ez I may say. Strange they should go at sech a time, ain't it?"

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"Wal, it looks ter me ez though he come hyar ez a spy fur ther hoss-thieves, red or white, an' that they've run off our animals 'cordin' ter an arranged plan!"

Rainer looked at the speaker a moment in surprise, and then broke out explosively:

"I reckon you've got ther fool in ther head, Saul Lewis. Who ever heerd o' sech a thing? Why, everybody in Colorado has heerd o' Avalanche Alf, an' nobody has a word ter say ag'in' him. Moreover, ef he had been ther thief, wouldn't he hev gone away with ther others?"

The last argument was unanswerable, so Saul dodged it, but the insinuation that he had the "fool in the head" had cut him to the quick, and he was not disposed to abandon his position.

"Who knows that he is Avalanche Alf? He says so, an' that's all we know about it."

Rainer was not at all convinced, but he was affected by the argument of his follower because it boded ill for the future. The party was now without means of getting out of the mountains, unless several days were allowed them, and internal quarrels would lead to serious results.

The conversation soon ended, however, and Captain Buck walked back to camp in a gloomy frame of mind. The future had a gloomy appearance.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE STORM BREAKS.

MORNING dawned, but the last signs of autumn had vanished. The ground had a white covering, and snow was descending thickly, rapidly, pitilessly. A strong wind had arisen, and the pines which grew along the ridges which surrounded the Horseshoe bowed and twisted, while there the snow was driven erratically about.

In the valley the wind struck but little, and, as before stated, the snow-flakes came down straight, rapidly, sullenly; there was every evidence that the storm-king meant business.

At daybreak all the miners were outside, and all were gazing at the scene in a blank, gloomy way. If Steve Williams and his friends still wished to remain in the mountains, their expression was not indicative of the fact.

Every one knew the storm was to be a long and severe one. Even a novice could tell that. Still, had it not been for the loss of their horses, they would have pushed out and done their best to get off the mountain before escape was impossible.

It was already too late for one thing; the trail left by the horse-thieves was blotted out and could not be regained.

The majority of the men seemed dazed, for they remembered that that particular part of the foot-hills was said to be a death-trap during the winter, but Captain Buck did not allow any inaction. He promptly started out the whole party for a last, vigorous search for the horses.

It was likely to fail, but the experiment was worth trying, and that, too, in earnest.

Their lives might depend upon it.

At the end of two hours they returned unsuccessful. All had given up the faintest hope, and the majority looked more than ever dazed and troubled.

Rainer sought Avalanche Alf at once.

"You know these mountains better than any o' ther rest o' us—what do you advise?"

"In regard to what?"

"Shall we strike out on foot?"

The youth shook his head decisively.

"No. We have seen the fury of the storm, and I doubt if any of us could brave it through the day. With the ladies to care for, it is utterly out of the question. It will soon turn colder, and then we should perish on the trail or be driven to a gulch for refuge, where we might starve. There is no better-protected place on the mountain than this valley. There will, of course, be a good deal of snow, for it will blow off the ridges, but we shall not get the winds which sweep the exposed region."

"But we may be snowed in fur ther whole winter," said Rainer, anxiously.

"Just what I thought when I first saw your outfit. If this storm holds on, and lays as it falls, you are laid up for the winter. On the other hand, if it ends sooner than we expect, you may get out. The same may be said if the weather turns warmer and the snow hardens sufficiently to bear our weight. Luckily, the slope of land prevents a snow-slide in the Horseshoe."

The young guide had only voiced Captain Buck's own opinion, and now that it was confirmed, he moved with his usual energy in such crises.

Collecting his men he explained the situation and directed every one to go out in search of game. Their supply of food was at a low point, and an extra supply must be laid in at once. What made the outlook all the gloomier was the fact that a month would reduce them to the resources of the chase, and the idea of subsisting on animal food alone for months was one which made the captain shiver.

He had never been reduced to that extremity, but he knew Nature would not submit.

Still, in just such food lay their reprieve, and out went the men with their rifles to do what they could.

They succeeded better than any one had expected, and when they came in it was with a good supply. They had obtained it at some privation, however, for on the ridges the wind was difficult to face.

There was little rest that day, for fuel was to be obtained for their fires, and they worked on in the driving snow until nearly exhausted.

Avalanche Alf had done as much as any of them. He had worked at Captain Buck's side, and by their combined efforts food and fuel enough to last for some time was stored in the cabin.

When all was done and the wearied men could retire to their houses, the afternoon was nearly spent. A great change had taken place within twenty-four hours. Now, everything was covered with a mantle of snow. Snow was everywhere. It was on the cliffs and pines, and in the valley it had formed in a mass which made locomotion difficult.

There were no longer signs of a rebellion, and Steve Williams was as meek as any of the party. If he still hated the young guide he gave no sign, and universal harmony seemed to reign.

Alf, however, was not so sure the mutineers ought to be forgiven. The stampede of the horses troubled him a good deal; he could not get rid of the impression that Steve and his fellow-mutineers knew more about their disappearance than honest men should. He even thought that he detected whispers among them, as well as looks of misgivings, as though something had gone wrong, and he thought it possible that they had discovered that they had done themselves more harm than they had any one else.

That evening each man kept his own cabin, and with a good fire going, tried to be as comfortable as possible. Luckily, the buildings had been made more substantial than the average; that was one of Captain Buck's hobbies; and no suffering occurred from the weather, though it had turned decidedly cold.

Alf Browning was hospitably entertained by the Rainers. For awhile their gloom was lightened by Betha's buoyant good humor—she did not yet realize their danger—but Buck sent her and Miss Violet to bed as soon as possible and then had another serious talk with the young guide.

He wanted the latter's opinion and advice.

"Ther question is, how be we goin' ter git out?" he asked.

"In my own opinion, we shall not get out," frankly answered Alf. "It's an all-winter affair, I think, though, as I have before said, if the snow thaws and then hardens enough to bear our weight, we may yet make the passage."

"I have been thinking about snow-shoes."

"You and I might make the passage; the ladies never could. I doubt if half the men could. You do not know what this particular region is with a soft snow everywhere. It will fill the numerous canyons and clefts in the earth, and he who would travel that way must look well to himself. Your family could never make the journey; it would be suicide to try. To fall into a canyon means to smother there."

"But it is also suicide ter stay hyar."

"We must hope for a hardening of the snow, or something else, to help us out."

And that was about all they could do.

Buck reproached himself bitterly as he lay in his bed that night and listened to the voice of the storm. Why had he delayed departure from the Horseshoe so long, and put his daughter's life in jeopardy to secure a few miserable dollars?

Such self-accusation was natural, but it did not help matters in the least.

The miner fell asleep. Several hours passed. He dreamed that he found the missing horses in an Indian camp; that he stole up, secured and stampeded them; but that he was closely pursued by the red-skins, who yelled like fiends.

He awoke and found no Indians present, but there was a shouting outside the cabin, and he arose and went to the window. It was so held by clinging masses of snow that he could not open it, but he managed to look out and see several men near the door.

He hastily dressed and went outside.

Five men were there, with Saul Lewis and Steve Williams at their head.

"What's ther matter?" he quickly asked.

"Ther matter is that we want that young whelp who calls hisself Avalanche Alf," Lewis explained.

"You want him? What fur?"

"Yes, what for? I'm here to answer for myself!"

It was the quiet voice of the young guide which had broken the silence, instead of Saul's angry one. A savage look crossed the latter's face and he would have moved over the threshold, but Captain Buck put out his arm and stopped him.

"Wait a bit! I want to know what flea you've got in your bunnit now," the veteran observed.

"Be you goin' ter defend a criminal?" angrily asked Saul.

"That's ther question!" added Steve Williams.

But Captain Buck struck his hand forcibly against the casing of the door in a way which made it rattle.

"Saul Lewis, you've been a good man all summer, but you seem ter hev lost your head now. I don't allow no man ter insinuate I'd defend a criminal. Choose yer words better, Saul; for ther Lord's sake do it, fur I don't want no trouble."

Indignation and prudence showed in the veteran's manner, but his visitors were wise enough to remember that he was a hard man to master when driven to the wall, and Williams spoke more mildly.

"We don't want trouble with you, cap'n, an' we meant no harm, but we be arter this Avalancho Alf, ez we said afore, an'—"

"What do you want?" tersely demanded Alf.

He read the meaning of the visit: Steve and his friends had recovered from their temporary humble mood, and they were resolved to make him suffer for having incurred their enmity.

"I reckon I want yer hide!" Saul Lewis declared. "Your little scheme to burn my cabin didn't work, but I'll larn you not ter try it ag'in."

"You talk in riddles," said Alf, coolly. "Has some one tried to burn your cabin? If so, when?"

"Yes, somebody has tried it, an' you are that somebody. You can't squeeze out on't. Ther logs ain't cold yet, an' I don't mean they shall be till you've stretched rope."

And the angry miner produced a cord as proof that he was really in the lynching business.

But Buck Rainer's blood was also up, and he gave Alf no chance to reply.

"Saul Lewis, you're out o' your head. Ef anybody has tried ter burn your house, it wain't Alf. He ain't been out ter-night. Cool off now, an' let common-sense have a show."

#### CHAPTER V.

##### A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF.

SAUL LEWIS had never been a rebellious man before the trouble came upon the party, but he now placed his arms akimbo and looked defiantly at Captain Buck, while the snow fell thick and fast upon him until he and his followers looked almost like specters come to town.

"It won't do!" he said, stubbornly. "You hev been our leader, but I reckon thar ain't no articles drawn up, an' that we ain't bound ter obey you ez soldiers do a cap'n. You've lost your sand and your sersè, an' we are now goin' ter run this circus. First o' all, we want that p'ison snake!"

He pointed at Alf, and the youth laid a restraining hand on angry Captain Buck's arm and faced the crowd coolly. He knew that they meant to use the rope on him with deadly effect, but he had seen danger before that night and did not waver.

If the worst came, he had two revolvers in his pockets.

"One word, gentlemen," he said, in a clear voice. "It is usual when men make charges for them to give particulars. Such a thing might not be out of place here. Mr. Lewis, will you oblige us?"

"Oblige ther Old Nick!" roared Lewis, angered anew by Alf's coolness. "I'll oblige



you by stretchin' yer neck. But ef you're so anxious, I'll give particulars."

"That's what we want," curtly interpolated Captain Buck.

"Ther long an' short on't is, I was awoke a leetle while ago by shoutin' outside, an' when I got thar I found these gentlemen"—waving his hand toward Steve and his friends—"puttin' out a fire which had been started ag'in' ther wall o' my cabin, on ther protected side. It had got a good grip, but they had seen it in tim', an' ez thar was plenty o' snow, it wa'n't hard ter put it out."

"It was Steve an' me diskivered it," added Sim Ryder. "I was awoke by ther storm, an' see'd a bright light shinin' in through ther winder. I got up an' looked out, an' then I see'd ther bleeze goin' an' a man standin' by it. I woke up Steve, an' we both recognized Avalanche Alf. I suggested that we nab him an' we come out, but he heerd us an' took ter his heels. We chased him an' he got inter ther house hyar, an' then we went back an' told Lewis."

"An' I see'd ther trail whar ther scamp run," said Lewis, "an' now I want satisfaction. I tole you I b'lieved ther critter had a hand in ther stealin' o' ther hosses, an' now I know it. It seems he's bound ter clean us out, but I'll stretch his neck fur him an' stop his cussedness."

Captain Buck had listened with growing anger, but Alf pushed him aside and faced the would-be lynchers. He was still calm except for the flashing of his eyes, which told that he was really as indignant as Rainer.

"Saul Lewis," he said, "you are being imposed upon. Williams and Ryder have lied to you, for I have not been outside this house since night fell. For some reason Williams hated me from the moment I struck town, and now it seems he is resolved to destroy me. But it won't work. I am younger than he, but I want him to understand I am not afraid of him openly, while as for his secret plots, I shall oppose him to the death!"

"An' I'll help you!" broke in Rainer, emphatically. "Steve Williams, ef I hear any more from you, I'll wipe ther ground all up with you. You're a mean critter, ez I found out some time ago, but you can't run this camp yet awhile. D'ye hear me?"

Steve's face was the picture of sudden fury, and he hotly replied.

"I hear ye, an' ye want ter be car'ful what ye say!"

"I do?" almost shouted the veteran. "You mis'erable little viper, do ye dare threaten me?"

"Yes, I do!" Steve declared, but his gaze wavered.

"What kin you do?" scoffed Rainer.

"I'll show ye ef ye ever lay a hand on me."

"Oul you will, eh? Wal, now's yer chance!"

And Captain Buck leaped over the threshold and seized the young rough in a grasp which made his flesh quiver.

Yet, to a certain degree, Steve was brave enough, and he aimed a blow at Buck's face. It missed, and in a moment more he was raised bodily and cast into the deep snow beyond the door.

"Let that be a lesson ter you, Sim Ryder," said the veteran, his strong face flushed with anger. "That calf is ther first person I've laid hands on in anger fur two year, but thar's life left in ther old man vit, an' I won't b'ar no nonsense. Es fur you, Saul Lewis, you're ther cat's-paw o' these youngsters, an' I advise you ter git out o' bad company afore it's too late. They sot fire ter yer cabin; that's who did it; an' 'twas all ter git revenge on Alf. But ther boyee is my guest, an' no man kin tech him while I kin lift a hand!"

He was like a lion in his wrath, and Lewis was cowed, if not convinced.

He stood in silence while Steve scrambled out of the snow. That vicious young man had his hand on his revolver, but Sim Ryder's spirits had been a good deal dashed, and he spoke in a low tone to his friend and the war-cloud perceptibly wavered.

They had decided that, with Alf to support him, Captain Buck was not a good man with whom to meddle.

"I didn't think this o' you," said Lewis, bitterly.

"Think what?" Rainer asked.

"That you'd stand up fur sech a critter."

"I've told ye once that you misjedge him. Steve has filled yer eyes with p'ison till you can't see straight; that's what's ther matter. I tell ye Avalanche Alf has done no harm. Don't ye know him wal by repertation? Did

you ever hear anybody speak ill o' him? O' course ye never did, an' we would hev a nice breeze around our ears ef we harmed ther foot-hills guide, wouldn't we?"

Lewis was staggered, figuratively speaking. He had to mentally acknowledge the truth of Buck's last argument, if not his former ones, and he could say no more.

"So be it, then, but I'm sorry you go back on yer old men."

He turned away, but Buck stopped him.

"Wait!"

"Wal?"

"Don't make no mistake, Saul; I don't go back on ye. It ain't a time fur internal quarrels. Ef we ever needed ter hang tergether, this is ther time. We're in a desprate fix, an' that's one reason why we should be wise an' prudent. Bear this in mind, Saul."

Lewis hesitated for a moment, and then turned and strode away in sullen silence.

But Steve Williams looked at Captain Buck loweringly.

"You'll be sorry fur this!" he said.

"Fur what?"

"Fur layin' a hand on me."

"Mebbe you think you kin stand up thar an' dar me ter do it, an' then go away soft. Mebbe, but I doubt it. You're a bad 'un, an' I'm sorry I ever took ye in. Look out fur yerself in ther futur', an' don't let me hear o' you merlestin' Avalanche Alf."

"Can't he care fur hisself?" sneered Steve.

"Ask me that question when we reach a town and I'll answer you," said the guide, quickly, goaded past endurance. "For the present I have nothing to say, and I advise you to look to yourself."

"That's good advice, so let it all eend hyar," said Buck, and as he spoke he stepped back and closed the door in the faces of the remaining men.

"I am sorry to have caused trouble by my coming," said Alf, regretfully.

"Now, don't you worry. What hev you did ter cause trouble? Nothin'. It's all Steve's ugliness. He ought ter be trounced, had that reptyle, an' only that we're situated ez we be, I'd do it mighty quick. Don't you worry, my boyee!"

Captain Buck spoke with rough heartiness, and Alf, who was learning to admire him more and more every hour, gave him his hand silently. He felt that the veteran was a man of unusually noble character.

"But why is Steve so down on ye?" Buck continued.

"That is a mystery. I never saw him until I came to your camp, so far as I know, but he seemed to take a dislike to me at the first. However, it don't matter, captain; I feel able to take care of myself, and as I shall not undertake to run the party, there is no reason why we should quarrel further. I am sure no right-minded person will believe I tried to fire the cabin. It would have been a useless crime."

"Sart'in it would, an' we won't consider the matter further. Some o' ther men are in a cranky mood, but we kin depend on ther biggest part o' them."

The two soon retired, and the remainder of the night passed quietly.

Day brought no cessation to the storm, and it was clear that all hopes of a retreat to the settlements must be abandoned until the snow hardened or disappeared.

The miners were very fortunate in having the protection of the valley. On the ridges it was a furious strife of the elements. The falling snow was caught by the fierce wind and whirled about fantastically, while the pines swayed and bowed as though likely to be torn up and carried along as was the snow.

In the Horseshoe the snow was piled in a great mass. A good deal of the part which fell on the ridges was blown over to the valley, and men moved about with difficulty.

They were literally "snowed in," and no one could say what the end would be. Captain Buck tried to be cheerful outwardly, but the prospect of a winter on such an unsatisfactory supply of food was disheartening, and as he looked at Betha he reproached himself bitterly for having been thus caught.

There were renewed consultations among the better men of the party, but the rebellious faction—composed of Lewis, Williams, Ryder, Drake, Wilson, Pratt and Orton—kept apart from the others, and sullenly resisted all attempts at reconciliation.

They said no more about the incendiary attempt, but it was clear they were not in a friendly mood.

All this was deeply regretted by Captain

Buck. Had it been in the mining season he would have dealt with the mutineers with a rigorous hand, but a division at this time was a serious matter.

During the forenoon Betha and Miss Violet were alone in their cabin, when the former looked out and saw Steve Williams approaching through the snow. She had not heard of the trouble of the previous night, and did not know to what a point the rebellion had advanced; but she had never liked Steve, and was not pleased to see him.

Still, adversity brings toleration, and she greeted him civilly when he reached the cabin.

"Whar is ther cap'n?" he asked, although he knew better than she did where Rainer was, and had improved the chance to call during his absence.

She answered that he was out, and then Steve added:

"Avalanche Alf ain't hyar, either, is he?"

"No, he went with father."

"It's queer what a hold he's got on ther cap'n."

"That's because father knows he is a nice young man."

"I don't agree with you, Betha. He ain't made a favor'ble impression 'mong ther men."

"Why not?"

Betha spoke with a warmth which should have warned her visitor, but he had come with an object and was not to be turned from it.

"They think he knows more about whar the hosses went ter than an honest man should."

"What do you mean?"

"Wal, ther men charge that he come hyar ez a spy fur hoss-thieves, an' yer kin see ther result."

"It's false—I know it is!" Betha indignantly declared. "Why, every one knows Avalanche Alf, and they all speak well of him. He is one of the most noted men in Colorado. No one can really believe such slanders."

"But what proof hev we that he is Avalanche Alf? This feller may be an impostor."

"He may be Christopher Columbus, but I don't believe it!" the girl spiritedly declared.

"Any one can see he is a nice fellow."

And then Betha blushed, as though she felt that her defense was very warm, everything considered. Steve thought so, too, and his ill-favored face seemed to grow darker, as well as more sulky.

"Take care that you don't make a mistake in him, Betha. I s'pose he has poured soft words into your ears till your head is turned, but that don't make black white."

Betha was really angry by this time. She had never liked Steve, and he had forced his company upon her when she would much rather have been alone, in the past, and now it was too much that he should come there and interfere with her friendships.

"I don't know as you need concern yourself about me," she exclaimed. "I don't know why you do it, anyway—"

"It's because I hev an interest in ye, an'—"

"Nobody asked you to be interested, did they?" somewhat ungraciously demanded the girl.

Steve's face seemed to grow another shade darker, and his hands worked nervously together.

"Thar ain't no call fur you to be so sharp. I reckon I'm ez good ez anybody hyar, an' I ain't goin' ter be put aside fur no upstart like Alf. What's-his-name?"

At this moment Miss Violet Rainer advanced, her wrinkled face as stern as that of an old-time warrior.

"Young man," she said, severely, "I reckon it's time for you to go. There can't any man come in here and talk like that. You pick up your hat and git!"

Steve looked rather dazed and alarmed, but he would not give way to a woman so easily.

"I reckon I'll go when I git ready!" he said, surlily.

"And I reckon you'll go now!" said Miss Violet, in an inexorable voice. "We'll see who's boss of this house!"

She picked up a stick of fire-wood and advanced upon him as violently as though she were a Napoleon, with an old-time French army at her back, and Steve vacated his chair hurriedly. He would not have been so disturbed had she been a man, but she was credited with being a person of "nerve," and it was something new in his experience to be attacked by a woman.

"Keep off!" he said, weakly; but Miss Violet made a charge, and Steve wheeled and fled precipitately from the cabin, thoroughly routed.

The maiden lady laid down her novel weapon calmly.



"I reckon the spirit of the old-style border woman is not yet wholly extinct," she serenely observed.

## CHAPTER VI.

### STEVE CONTINUES ACTIVE.

Two weeks passed slowly to the dwellers in the Horseshoe, but the time had been sufficient to convince them that they were really snowed in. Every day had seen the supply increase. At times the air cleared and the sun shone, but the reprieve was but temporary and trouble soon began again. It continued until the quantity piled up in the valley would have amazed a person not acquainted with the region.

The cabins barely showed their tops above the mass, and no one thought of moving except by means of paths which were kept open. The fact that they were daily receiving so much of the stuff which originally fell on the ridges led to a consideration of the plan of moving their quarters, but examination convinced them they had the best place of all.

On higher land the sweep of the wind was at times terrific, and the cold almost unbearable, while the danger of snow-slides was always before them. Consequently, they decided to stay in the valley and get along with the bulk of snow as best they could.

They had entered upon a winter which was known as one of Colorado's severest on record, and they daily had proof of the fact. No one ventured out when it could be avoided, but they had laid in all the fire-wood they could, and thus they fought on, hoping for a change for the better.

Between the mutineers and Buck's adherents a very bitter feeling had become established. Steve's visit to the captain's cabin had thoroughly aroused the latter, and he visited the young rough and talked plainly, adding that the house was no longer open for him to visit at any time.

After that, the rival parties drifted further apart and, really, lived as separate bands, except that Saul Lewis each day visited Rainer for a supply of flour, salt and such articles as had been common property. Even over there there was trouble. The hot-headed mutineers insisted on having larger supplies than were furnished, but Buck knew the imperative necessity of prudence and adhered to his plan of making these precious articles go as far as they would.

Better be on short allowance for a long time than to waste the supply and soon be driven to the necessity of living on game alone.

Steve, who possessed an active, if not a wise, mind, had led his party out on snow-shoes, one day, and all expected to reach the settlements, but the truth of Avalanche Alf's predictions was soon shown.

The countless canyons and clefts peculiar to the vicinity had filled with snow to a deceptive level, and when footing seemed good the men had found themselves floundering in feathery snow which nearly smothered some of the party.

They soon returned, wet, weary and angry, and from that time the project was not mentioned. The mutineers were, however, restless and dissatisfied, and if the others relapsed into indifference, Steve Williams and Sim Ryder stirred them up and kept their anger warm against Buck Rainer.

The chief cause of present complaint was the fact that they were reduced to the level of dependents; that they had to depend on Rainer for their daily food, and had to take just such quantities as he gave.

They forgot that by their rebellion they had forfeited all claim upon him.

Few men would have dealt so justly with them as Captain Buck did. Each mutineer had the same quantity of food that he, himself, did. Thus far, he overlooked their rebellion. But the hot-headed fools did not give him credit for anything. His prudence was regarded as a swindle on them, and consequent bitterness prevailed.

It was Steve Williams who stirred up the most mischief.

One day he came to Saul Lewis, who was the solid man of the rebel party, because of his years and past good record, and opened in the old, complaining vein:

"How much longer is this sort o' thing goin' on?"

"Wa-al, I don't see no signs o' it's playin' out, do you?"

"Not unless we act like men o' nerve."

Lewis hesitated, and then slowly asked:

"What idee hev you got in your head now?"

"I'll tell ye. We're done with Buck Rainer, ain't we?"

"Pears like it."

"Wal, I reckon he has got suthin' which belongs ter us. Thar is a leetle pile o' gold cached in ther big cabin, in which all are equal sharers. I reckon we might ez wal take our shares now. Eh?"

"'Twas ther agreement that it should be divided when we got back to ther settlements."

"I reckon that bargain is off."

"I'm afeerd you couldn't make Buck see it in that light. He's a man ter hold ter a bargain like a burr. No, I reckon we'll hev ter wait till we strike ther towns fur ther division. It's jest ez wal, too, fur we can't spend more money hyar than we hev coined."

Saul tried to turn the drift of the young man's mind by this bit of facetiousness, but he was unsuccessful. Steve remained somber and sullen.

"Mebbe you're willin' ter give him a chance ter run away with our share, but I ain't."

"Come, come; go slow!" advised Lewis.

"D'ye know what you're talkin' about? Buck Rainer is wrong in this matter, but I will say he is ther honestest man I ever knowed, an' we are just ez safe ter trust ther money with him ez with a Baptist deacon. No, no; don't be afeerd. Ther money is safe!"

As emphatically as he spoke he could not convince Steve, who was too stubborn to bear the voice of reason at any time, and he growled and kicked until Saul's increasing irritation told him he was venturing on dangerous ground.

Then he tried another tack.

"How about the provisions—flour, salt, and so forth? Are we ter hev an ekul share with Buck's men, an' hev it hyar ter use ez we see fit, or be we goin' ter him like the beggar did ter Lazarus, an' coax like kids fur ev'ry mouthful we git?"

Venomously enough Steve spoke, and he had at last touched a responsive chord in Saul Lewis's heart. The latter knew Rainer to be as honest as any living man was, but it *did* seem a little hard when the two factions had practically separated that one should humble itself to the other by going each day for a pittance.

Such was Saul's view. He would not have believed in squandering the small store recklessly, as did the hot-headed boys, but—Well, Saul knew he had done wrong, and it cut him to the quick to still be under Buck Rainer's rule, so far.

Thus it was that he listened more closely to Steve. He yielded in the end, and the result was a formal claim upon Buck for the share of the provisions belonging to the mutineers. He heard them patiently, and with almost patriarchal forbearance, and his voice was mild as he replied, but under all was a shade of firmness which told that he was fixed in his decision.

"I'll trouble you ter recollect ther terms o' our compact when we started out this year," he said. "Them that has been with me in previous seasons knows that it has always been ther same, an' that them as didn't like my terms was at perfect liberty not ter come. But I speak only o' this year. It was agreed that I should hev charge o' all common stores, an' deal 'em out ekully ter all men; that no man could exceed his share, an' that ef he saw fit ter leave ther outfit, he must go empty-handed so fur as ther common stock was concerned."

"We know all that," Steve Williams interrupted, roughly, "but that referred ter one man backin' out an' goin' home, not ter this case. This is a wholly different one, an' ez no agreement was made about it when we was gittin' ready ter start—"

"Ef it had been mentioned, I should 'a' told them who spoke on't that their room was better'n their comp'ny," said Rainer, with a touch of warmth.

"Wal, you didn't tell us so," said Steve, with surly insolence.

"Why, didn't I? Because I supposed you were ready to abide by the terms I proposed. You said you was ready so to do, an' by ther Lord Harry, you *will* abide by 'em."

"Do you mean yer won't give us our share o' ther eatables?"

"That's jest what I do mean. But why do you kick? Don't you git yer share?"

"You say we do," was the significant response.

Buck Rainer clinched his hands and took a step forward, as though he would have struck down the insolent fool, but he controlled his anger by a great effort.

"Well, well, well!" he muttered, "I s'pose I oughter b'ar with you, fur we are all in ther

same fix, but ther Lord knows it's hard. It sartainly is!"

"Don't preach, old man!" coarsely advised Steve. "Talk ain't what we're arter. Jest you fork over ther share o' this grub we rightfully ask fur, an' we won't call fur you ter help us ag'in, now you bet."

"No!" firmly replied Buck; "I shall hold ther bargain. A hot-headed chap like you, Steve Williams, ain't fit ter hev sech an important charge; one on which depends human lives. Ye would squander ther provisions, an' then call on us fur more. We will settle ther hull case right now by keepin' on ez we've been doin'; ez we agreed ter do afore we left ther town; an' you kin git your proper share ev'ry day by comin' ter me. That's ther only way."

And from this decision no one could move the veteran.

There was great indignation in the mutineers' camp, and they would at once have made an attack on their late colleagues but for the fact that they were outnumbered.

Such an attack would surely result disastrously to them.

But the train had been laid which led to the powder, and from that time they talked only of "getting square," as they expressed it, with Rainer's adherents.

In other words, they intended to be revenged.

Steve Williams was, as before, the brightest star in their sky, and he boldly announced that, as they owed their trouble to Avalanche Alf, he would wind up the career of the foot-hills guide in a hurry.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE NIGHT ATTACK.

AND still the snow fell. It was a common remark among Buck Rainer's followers that they "had never seen anything like it," a standard weather remark; and even Avalanche Alf, who had seen many a winter in the foot-hills, finally began to have the same opinion.

Of course snow did not fall constantly, now that the first great storm was over, but every day saw clouds pile up against the sky and discharge a fresh supply.

The Horseshoe valley was a wonder; snow had nearly reached the level of the cabin-tops, and Alf did not deny that they were likely to be entirely buried. As has already been explained, a good part of the snow which fell on the ridge surrounding the valley was blown over upon them.

This at first seemed unfortunate, but it was their salvation. It made practically no difference whether there were fifteen or twenty-five, or fifty, feet in the valley, while the barren ridge—Kettle's Rim, they called it—had nothing whatever to convert into that most fearful of Colorado's terrors—a snow-slide.

So the snow-prisoners lived on as philosophically as possible. Paths connected the cabins, but no effort was made to tread the general level or to shovel more about the buildings than was necessary for light and air.

Avalanche Alf watched the signs of the air, and other weather probabilities carefully, and more anxiously than he would had no other person been in danger.

But for Buck Rainer and his daughter he had taken a fancy which was something more than a fancy, perhaps. Buck's sturdy, unwavering kindness was duly appreciated, while Betha—

Well, Alf was a boy, and likely to grow to be a man, if he was a great mountain-guide, and he could not but feel that the girl was the personification of beauty and goodness.

Above all things he wished to save her from the rigors, dangers and hardships which must accompany a winter in the valley. Her gayety would fail when starvation stared them in the face, as it was liable to do, and she seemed the least fit to bear it of all the party.

But, though Alf wished for a thaw and a subsequent freeze, he could do no more than wish, and the snow, instead of hardening became more feathery and each day grew deeper.

And each additional snow-fall lessened their chances of escape.

Shortly after the conference between Steve and Lewis, Avalanche Alf left the captain's cabin, ascended the side of the valley and stood on the Kettle's Rim. To this point he had gone every day since their captivity began, for it was the most favorable one from which to study the weather probabilities.

What a scene was spread before him!

He could see for miles and miles in three directions, where there was a succession of snow-capped peaks and beautifully-loaded trees. On the fourth were the spires of the upper Rockies, tall, grim, white, grand.



It was a scene fit for a painter's pencil.

But Alf Browning studied it from another point, and admiration was subordinate to gloomy apprehension.

"No change!" he said, shaking his head. "Those snow-caps foretell another fall, and I suppose it'll go on for months. Heaven help us if it does, for it will bring starvation to that camp."

A gust of wind came whirling along the ridge and he brushed away the snow it landed upon him and then turned toward the valley again.

It looked somewhat like a place given over to the burrows of wild animals, except that from each of the holes in the snow-surface a thin, blue column of smoke was arising.

"I'm afraid more than one of them will die before they bid adieu to the Horseshoe," the youth muttered. "It's a pity they can't all hold together in such an emergency."

He was still full of the subject when he neared Captain Buck's cabin, laboriously pushing his way through the snow-path, and as he neared the cabin where the stores were kept he was at once put on the alert by the sight of Sim Ryder closely examining it.

The fellow started at sight of Alf and looked confused.

"What are you doing?" the guide asked.

Ryder swallowed twice, and then the bully triumphed over the craven in his nature.

"Wal, I don't seem ter be doin' nothin', do I?" he asked, insolently.

"It's hard to tell, but signs are against you."

"They are, eh? Wal, what be you goin' ter do about it? Mehbe you want ter tackle a chap about my size. Ef ye do, put up yer dukes, my gay galoot."

"Cheap talk amounts to nothing," Alf calmly replied, "and I have noticed that the more fool a man has in the head, the more fight he has in his fists. I decline to set myself up for a pugilist, but just allow me to whisper in your ear that I shall tell Captain Rainer that you have been hanging around the supply-cabin."

"What's that ter you?" growled Sim.

"To me, nothing; to him, a good deal."

"How so?"

"He will very likely guard the provisions more closely."

Sim shook his fist at the guide.

"See hyar, cuss you! don't you be too fresh, my young snipe. I'll punch you in the beak!"

"You've said enough," Alf sharply observed. "I've said once I don't hanker for a fight, and I'll say now that you can't scare me with any weapons you carry. That's all we need to observe, only, bear in mind that I shall tell Captain Buck what I've seen. Good-day!"

Alf strode away as cheerfully as though Sim had not shouted several insolent and abusive remarks after him, but, like a truly brave youth, Alf scorned to notice all the venomous flings of quarrelsome fools.

But when he came to close quarters he was "right thar," as his friends observed.

He went on and was soon relating his story to Rainer.

"It don't surprise me in the least," said the veteran, "but it does seem queer men'll be sech fools. Can't Steve Williams an' his deluded followers see a hole in a grind-stone? It seems not, by ther Eternal! but I'll show 'em we are still on deck. Steal ther provisions? Wal, not ef this camp holds together."

Captain Buck smote himself on the hip, and it was a peculiarity of his that when he thus emphasized a declaration, he usually kept it as sacredly as though it were an oath.

"I'll set a double guard ev'ry night after this," he said; "an' we'll see ef these durned mutineers is goin' ter run ther outfit. What is needed is right vigorous measures, but I hate ter be harsh with men who have dug with me all summer."

Mature meditation convinced Rainer that a new order of things must be inaugurated. Both the provisions and the gold were in the larger cabin, and the only real protection for them, since the mutineers were now to be regarded as actual enemies, was to consolidate those who remained faithful.

A little labor would place Buck's cabin beside the largest one, and from that time it was best that all the men should occupy the latter, while Miss Rainer and Betha would be near, and yet retired, in their present quarters. This plan, too, would allow a great saving of fuel, which it was not easy to obtain.

Rainer was thinking this over in the early twilight, with Miss Violet preparing supper, and Alf and Betha talking at one side, when there was a sound outside which brought the veteran to his feet at once.

"What's that?" he cried.

"A revolver-shot, I verily believe," said Miss Rainer.

"So it was, and there's another!"

The last speaker was Alf, and as he spoke he shot through the outer door, closely followed by Captain Buck.

They seemed to be none too soon. The first and second shots had been only a prelude, as it seemed, and others were following briskly. Such being the case, it was clear something was going on in which Rainer ought to have a share.

He was impressed by the fact that these shots sounded from the direction of the large cabin, and though it did not seem possible that the mutineers would try for the food at such an early hour, it was well to look to it.

Rainer gained the lead as they reached the outer air, and he at once turned to the right. Strictly speaking, it was through a corridor they were going, for the snow was piled up above their heads on two sides, and this, combined with the natural darkness, made their way an obscure one.

Captain Buck knew every foot, however, and he soon traversed the few feet which separated him from the supply-cabin. Then he broke through and saw just what he had expected.

The mutineers had made their stroke to steal the provisions, but the guard was standing loyally at his post, and the rattling of fire-arms told how much in earnest all were.

Rainer appeared on the scene like a lion.

"Down with yer weepens!" he shouted, in a voice like a young cyclone. "Ther man who fires fu'st will git perforated by me!"

If he thought the threat would stop the affair, he was soon shown his mistake. A revolver cracked, and a bullet sped by his ear so closely that he heard it whiz.

In that dark cavity it was hard to tell more about anything than that several dark forms were visible, but he had seen the flash of the revolver, and it was another feather on the scale.

With a ringing shout he sprang forward, and in a moment more the man was lying prostrate with the angry veteran upon his breast. The latter had forborne to shoot, as threatened, but his hand was on the fellow's throat, and those who had felt his grip in anger never cared to sample it again.

"You white-livered cur!" shouted Rainer, "I'll shut yer wind off furever!"

A helpless gurgle went up from the man, and his hands fluttered feebly around Buck's.

"Fur the Lord's sake, spare me!" he managed to gasp.

Buck Rainer was not an assassin, and the fellow was in no real danger. Not so the veteran. Another of the mutineers had his eye upon him, and he rushed forward with uplifted knife, murder in his heart.

He bent over him, his breath came in quick gasps, his eyes glistened like those of a wild beast, and in a moment more Captain Buck would have been sent on the last, red road of life.

But the knife did not fall.

There was a thud, as of a heavy blow, and the would-be assassin staggered, tripped over Rainer, and fell headlong in the snow.

The veteran had been saved by a hair's-breadth.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### OUT ON THE KETTLE'S RIM.

RAINER was raised on his feet by strong hands and he saw Avalanche Alf beside him, but it was no time for words. The fight had been going on in a desultory way, but there was now a shout and all Captain Buck's adherents appeared on the scene.

That ended the fight. Outnumbered, the mutineers had a choice between hopeless fighting and surrender, and they chose the last.

Some of them, it is true, plunged into the snow and tried to escape, but it was a vain attempt and all were soon taken in. It is scarcely necessary to say Steve Williams led them.

Rainer ordered lights started in the supply cabin, and there he had the men set up in a row before him. Some looked ashamed as they met his stern gaze, but the majority had nerve enough to persist even in a bad cause.

As luck would have it, only two men showed signs of the late affray. Orion had a slight revolver wound in his arm, while Steve Williams's neck was discolored from the choking Rainer had given him.

"Wal, be you satisfied?"

It was Captain Buck's sarcastic voice, but it

had no promising effect on the mutineers. An oath fell from Steve's lips.

"No, we ain't satisfied," he answered, "an' we won't be till we hev yer blood."

"Leave life an' death ter Him who gives an' takes away," said the veteran, more gravely. "'Tain't for man ter say when we shall go on ther last trail, an' I hope 'tain't fur me ter die at ther hands o' sech a sneak ez you be. Ef I had a dog who was half ez much o' a cur, I'd kill him; I would, I swar!"

Steve opened his lips, but Saul Lewis touched his arm quickly.

"Fool! will you make our fix wuss?" he demanded.

Rainer saw the motion.

"Saul," he said, mildly, "be you ready ter turn back from ther down'ard road?"

"I've set ther mark," Lewis replied, "an' I'll abide by it. I've told ye so afore. Don't address me solely again. What's good fur my mates, is good fur me."

Captain Buck sighed.

"Poor, deluded creatures, you can't see that you are cuttin' yer own throats," he said, soberly. "I feel sorry it's so, fur I've mined with ye in fair weather an' foul. But you've tipped over ther dough-dish now; I can't b'ar no more."

Standing before those sullen men, Rainer's grave, sad, noble face looked lofty and grand. He was less like a relentless judge than a kind parent, a comparison not out of place when one looked at his gray hairs and the almost beardless faces of the greater part of the mutineers.

"Ther last cord is snapped asunder," he continued. "When I said I would keep all ther food hyar I did it fur ther good o' all. Hungry men are apt ter lose ther heads, and I knew what leetle we had should be strung out an' made ter go ez fur ez possible ter mix with ther fresh meat we got. Ter live on that alone fur weeks would be no pleasure."

"We've heerd all this afore," Steve rudely broke in.

"So you hev, but, ez somethin' new, I'll add that all this nonsense, an' this outbreak, will do ye no good. Ther will be no division o' ther provisions, nor will another chance be given you ter steal any. Ther compact we made when we left ther towns will be carried out ter ther letter."

"I object ter them hevin' another item o' food!" emphatically said one of Buck's followers.

"What've ye got ter do about it?" wolfishly demanded Steve.

"Ez much ez you, I reckon."

"Thar's solid hoss sense in your idee," said Rainer, addressing his men, "but I am goin' ter deal with these deluded men ez though nothin' had happened. It's more than they deserve, but they'll hev ther daily allowance ther same ez before."

Williams opened his lips for a pert remark, but Saul Lewis plucked at his sleeve and stopped him.

"Don't be a fool!" said the elder man. "It's ther mercy o' ther Lord we ain't all cut off."

"Howsumever," pursued Captain Buck, "I hope you will hev ther sense ter see that this can't go on much longer. You've fired on my men ter-night, an' ef strict jestic was did, you would be strung up ter a tree. But I'm goin' ter use you better than you hev used yerselves, an' ther grub will be dealt out ther same ez before."

Saul Lewis was plainly touched, and he thanked his old leader for his forbearance, much to the disgust of Williams and the younger mutineers. They were so set in their wrong-headedness that sense and gratitude were alike unknown qualities.

Captain Buck continued, and plainly mapped out the course to be pursued by the mutineers in the future. Saul Lewis was to come daily for their allowance of food, but, except for that visit, none of them would be allowed near the quarters of the larger party.

A man venturing there would be regarded as a trespasser and at once placed under arrest.

In brief, the line which Williams and his men had seen fit to draw between the two divisions was to be one of strict observance from that time.

When Rainer had said all he had to say he sent the fellows away. They went in silence; even Steve had nothing more to add.

He knew they were being dealt with far more mercifully than they deserved, though he would not admit it.

During the rest of the night the supply-cabin was closely guarded, and the following day Rainer's men were busy. Their snow-shovels,



though all of their own manufacture, were used with good effect; the space between the large cabin and Buck's was cleared, and the two were set up side by side before another night fell.

After that there was little chance for the mutineers to do any thieving. The larger cabin became the home of all except Rainer, Alf and the women, and it would never be untenanted.

That night there was another fall of snow, and the Horseshoe was a dreary-looking place in the morning. Looking across it, not a cabin-top could be seen, and the men had to dig holes for the escape of the smoke before fires could be started.

The day was also remarkable from another fact. All attempt to keep the paths open was abandoned, and Buck and his men dug a tunnel which stretched from cliff to cliff.

From this time that was their sole means of communication with the outer world.

The snow-fall last mentioned was followed by a "cold wave" of unusual venom, and only one of Rainer's party showed a desire to leave the shelter of the valley.

Avalanche Alf, however, was not going to be scared away from his daily visit to the Kettle's Rim. This was the place where he took weather observations, and he did not intend to give up the practice.

He went as usual, but when he arose above the valley and got the full force of the wind he almost regretted it. It swept down across the Kettle's Rim viciously, and each gust seemed like a serpent's tooth.

Alf, however, had seen too much of rough life to be dismayed by such a trifle, and he made for the partial shelter of three large trees a short distance away.

As usual, the top of the ridge was almost wholly bare. The sweeping wind had sent the snow whirling down to lower land, chiefly into the Horseshoe, so traveling was easy.

The young guide took position and studied the signs of earth and air. He decided that a cold period was ahead of them, during which no great amount of snow would fall, but that furnished no way of escape from the mountains.

As far as he could see the deep, feathery mass lay trackless and glittering. There were places where a man might have waded it, and others where it filled deep gulches to a level; places where a plunge into their depths meant death by suffocation.

It was the worst point in Colorado, and, though Alf might have escaped alone, he knew the women could not until the snow hardened or melted.

He was thinking of all this when a slight stir behind him reminded him that he had often seen grizzly bear "sign" in the vicinity, and he was turning about quickly when a heavy weight fell upon his back, knocking him to the ground.

As he went he caught sight of a man, and it flashed upon him that the venom of the mutineers was again showing itself. At any rate, it was safe enough to make prompt resistance, and as he went over on his back he drew up his knees to his chin and then let out his feet with full force.

He had not miscalculated. They encountered the stomach of a man who was trying to kneel upon him, and then that individual turned an involuntary back somersault and went shooting over a bit of adjacent ice.

Alf tried to spring to his feet, but the attempt was a failure. Other hands were upon him; he was forced back, despite his struggles, and, looking up, he saw the vindictive face of Steve Williams. Close beside him was Sam Orton.

"Lay still, durn ye, or I'll knife ye!" said Steve, flashing a knife before the guide's eyes.

"Well, ain't I lying still?" coolly asked Alf, taking in the whole situation at a glance.

"You'll lie stiller afore we're done with ye," said Williams, viciously.

"Yes, fur I'll cut his heart out!"

The last sanguinary assertion came from the man who had been kicked in the stomach, and he staggered forward, bent on carrying

1 Alf's career would be over.

## PTER IX.

### IS FATE.

actual danger, and settled if Ryder

opped him.

"in' on?" he

knocked ther wind all out o' me, an' I'm goin' ter hev revenge."

"You go slow an' let yer ha'r grow," said Steve, coolly. "Ther pain'll soon die away. Ef it don't, run down ter Yankem & Curefitt's drug-store an' get some pain distinguishyer."

"Oh! you kin laugh when *your* toes ain't trod on," growled Sim, surlily.

"Don't you raise yer bazoo too sprightly," said Steve, with an ugly look. "Ef you think you hate Mister A. A. Avalanche more nor I do, you're mistook, an' I'm goin' ter make him smell brimstone."

"You had better not concern yourself about me," interrupted Alf, coolly. "You have already gone too far, and I advise you to let me up and get away from here on the jump. I'm a patient fellow, but it's getting threadbare at the elbows, and if you ain't careful, you'll hear something fall, yet."

"Oh! you kin crow, can't ye?" sneered Steve.

"Possibly you may eat crow yet."

Steve was about to answer when Orton observed with unnecessary emphasis that the weather was cold, and this served to bring the other two mutineers to their senses. They had come out on the Kettle's Rim with a fixed purpose, and as they were every moment growing colder and more clumsy, it was clear they must do their work soon if at all.

Orton had a rope at hand, and this was bound around Alf's wrists, despite all his struggles.

Then he was raised to his feet and marched along the ridge, one of his captors always holding a revolver at his head, ready for use.

The foot-hills guide knew he was in great danger. Steve Williams, in particular, hated him bitterly, and it would not be at all strange if the fellow contemplated murder. He argued that all his troubles had resulted from Alf's coming to the Horseshoe, and it was now in his power to end the feud forever.

And Alf judged that his moral sense was so low he would not shrink from such a deed.

Knowing that none of Buck Rainer's party were abroad, he wasted no breath in vain calling for help, but he kept his eyes wide open and watched for a chance to turn the fortunes of war in his favor.

But the chance did not occur, and the quartette soon reached a cluster of trees at a point where the bitter-cold wind had a full sweep over the Kettle's Rim.

Steve spoke to his companions, and in a very short time Alf was bound to one of these trees.

"Here you be, nice an' pritty," said Williams. "How do ye like it?"

"Why do you waste breath in such foolish questioning?" Alf curtly asked.

"I want to know ef you are cool an' comfortable. How much below zero do you suppose ther mercury would indicate hyar on ther Kettle's Rim?"

"Oh! go and get some brains in your head!" said Alf, with so much contempt that Steve's flow of words was checked.

But he soon managed to rally.

"You kin cackle now, ef you want ter, but your enthusiasm will soon take cold when I tell ye ther lay-out. We hev tied ye up here ter stay, an' you know ez walez I do that you'll freeze in less than two hours. But that ain't all. Nigh hyar is a cave whar a couple o' grizzlies make their home. Wal, we're now goin' ter smoke 'em out, an' when they come *you* will git ther blame on't. Mebbe you know what that means, an' mebbe you don't; so I'll say that they will fall on ye like a devourin' cyclone. Boyees, go an' begin ther smokin'-out, while I stay hyar an' explain ter Mister A. A. Avalanche what he may expect."

Orton and Ryder went, and Steve continued to jeer at the helpless prisoner until his allies returned and announced that they had started a fire which would soon smoke out the bears, and that the safest place on record was not just there.

Steve heard, and he only paused to utter a last farewell, and then he and his followers beat a hasty retreat, slapping their hands to get warmth into them.

Avalanche Alf was left alone.

A more dismal, bleaker place could not easily be found. The wind swept along the Kettle's Rim, driving the loose snow before it, and the air was so bitterly cold that the young guide's blood seemed turning to ice.

As Steve had said, two hours in such a place would effectually freeze him.

He wrestled with his bonds, hoping to break or loosen them, but it was in vain, and he found that he must face the situation without any visible means of escape.

For the time he had forgotten what had been said about the bears, but the matter was soon brought again to his memory. There was a crashing among the small bushes near at hand, and then, as he looked hurriedly up, a huge form lumbered into view.

It was a grizzly bear.

Avalanche Alf stood perfectly still, feeling an uneasiness Steve had not been able to arouse. He knew enough of Old Eph's species so that he did not desire further acquaintance, and he knew, furthermore, that it would take the monster but a moment to end his career, if he was so disposed.

Moreover, Eph was in an ugly mood. He had been smoked out of his cosey den, and he felt like tackling the whole world and making it tremble and weep. Alf saw the twinkle of his vicious eyes, and read all this.

As Eph came from the bushes he met a fierce rush of wind, and he paused as though a good deal disgusted. Glancing around he perceived Alf, and then his gaze became fixed.

He seemed surprised, and unable to account for the boy's presence there in any common way, but it was no place for elaborate analyses, and his wonder soon gave place to anger again.

Alf saw his danger, and struggled with his bonds until the tree shook. In order to leave him in as bleak a place as possible, Steve had selected trees which grew at the edge of a gulch—so close, in fact, that their roots projected over on one side.

As the youth struggled, the tree to which he was tied rocked over the chasm, and a mass of earth loosened and went rattling down.

Encouraged, he renewed his efforts, though well aware that if he went over, it would be to fall into deep snow, where, secured to the tree as he was, he might smother; but that was better than being torn to pieces by the grizzly.

Old Eph seemed to regard his movements hostile, however, for he suddenly ceased his looking, growled and started forward. Probably he believed he had found the rascal who had smoked him out of house and home; in any case, he had found some one upon whom he did not hesitate to try to wreak his vengeance.

Avalanche Alf was now in a fix which he could not meet as philosophically as he had done the other. He knew something about Old Eph, the king of the mountain, and knew that one sweep of his terrible paw was liable to kill him.

At the best, he could hold out only a short time if the brute attacked him.

With evilly-twinkling eyes and exposed teeth, Old Eph advanced. The boy looked toward the Horseshoe, hoping to see a friend, yet well aware that all the chances were against it. Even then he did not call, for he knew it would be a waste of breath, and Steve Williams might be listening for just such signs of weakness.

"If I ever get clear he shall suffer for it!"

Avalanche Alf hissed the words through his set teeth, and his eyes blazed with anger, but there was little time for more words on the subject.

Old Eph required all the attention he was at liberty to bestow on any one.

Close at hand the brute now was, and the loose earth shook perceptibly under his tread. It gave Alf an idea. The ground was weakening; might not the bear's weight, added to his own struggles, suffice to tear it apart and send the whole mass into the gulch?

It was worth trying. Better a grave in the snow than death at the grizzly's claws.

So the boy braced himself for a last, great effort, and the tree shook under the shock. But it did not yet give way, and Eph, angered afresh, growled and showed his teeth anew.

Forward he came; the ground trembled more than ever; Alf sprung back as far as was possible, and then—then Old Eph had a surprise.

The already weakened ground proved unequal to the demand upon it; there was a snapping of roots, a fresh fall of earth; and then the tops of the trees bent northward, and went toppling over the edge of the gulch.

Old Eph caught alarm and turned to flee, but he was a little too late. The ground glided out from under his feet; he clawed wildly at vacancy, thrusting his claws everywhere except where there was good footing, and then he went over the verge.

Alf had preceded him. His tree swapped ends with startling quickness, and, as the top became the bottom, the boy had a view of the sky from between his heels.

Then he shot down toward the snow.



He was not overjoyed, for he expected no better fortune than to smother when he struck, but his hopes went up again as, stretched to the utmost by the strain upon them, his bonds snapped asunder.

Then Alf thought quickly. If possible he must save himself from falling into the bed of snow. How could it be done?

#### CHAPTER X.

##### SQUARING THE ACCOUNT.

EMERGENCIES often quicken men's wits, and Avalanche Alf planned well. He had just time to grasp a branch of the nearest tree when it struck the snow.

In a moment more the boy was covered with the feathery stuff. It filled his ears, eyes and mouth; it covered him over; and he had a vague impression that he was falling through a good deal of space. Then began a lively struggle.

Holding to the tree as the only available footing, Alf struggled to an upright position and found that his head was in the upper world. The tree had saved him. But where was the grizzly?

There was no hole in the snow to show where he had entered, and the boy glanced up toward the top of the cliff. Then he uttered a whistle of surprise. He saw Old Eph, but he was in a position so novel that it was no wonder he had not thought of looking there for him.

The face of the ledge was uneven in most places, and at one point two projections were formed like a pair of massive jaws, wide open. Between these projections Eph had caught, and there he hung, kicking in a most zealous and remarkable way.

Had all of Alf's trouble been purely accidental he would have laughed heartily to see the animal thus caught, for it had its ludicrous feature, but the boy could not forget that he had just escaped death by a mere chance, and that, too, through the instrumentality of men actuated by the meanest spirit of revenge.

Consequently, he regarded the bear as only a secondary part of the affair and, cold and shivering, set out for firmer footing.

His danger was over, and he left the bed of snow, with the grizzly struggling above it, and made his way back toward the Horseshoe.

For once the youth was excited. He realized just how cowardly and mean had been the attempt upon his life, and he resolved to square the account without delay. Steve Williams must suffer as much as he had done.

Of course he might at once have gone to Buck Rainer and enlisted his superior force in his behalf, but he did not once think of it. It had always been his way to care for himself or go uncared-for, and he meant to do just the same now. Consequently, when he struck the Horseshoe, he did not move toward Rainer's quarters, but toward those of the mutineers. His manner, as he went, was not unlike that of Old Eph after he was smoked out.

He had not been near the mutineers' quarters since the division occurred, but he easily found the tunnel they had dug through the snow, in imitation of that made by Rainer's men, and he soon stood by the door.

He did not wait to rap, but flung it open with a quick motion and strode across the threshold.

He was in the midst of the mutineers.

All were there, some being engaged in smoking and talking, others in card-playing and other amusements, but Steve Williams, Orton and Ryder were close by the fire, as though they had not yet succeeded in overcoming the effect of the cold weather outside.

But every one came to a full stop as Avalanche Alf thus appeared to them, and they stared in open-mouthed wonder. To the majority of them, it was a conundrum past solving to tell why he was there.

Alf, however, had eyes only for Steve Williams, and, after one good look at him, he strode across the floor to his side.

"You miserable coward!" he exclaimed, "you see I am here, after all."

Steve glanced uneasily at Saul Lewis, but did not answer.

"Your little scheme has not worked," Alf added. "I am not on the Kettle's Rim, frozen to death, but here, and alive and active. You scoundrel, your plan has miscarried!"

Steve rallied. He was in his own camp, surrounded by men who would back him as far as they were able. He was safe. Moreover, these same men regarded him as a great fighter, and it would never do to show even the tip of a white feather while they were around.

"See hyar," he growled, "what're you kickin' about? What ther matter with yer, anyhow?"

"Do you pretend ignorance?"

"None o' yer business!"

"You'll find I shall make it my business. You are a scoundrel, a coward and a sneak, Steve Williams. What words will better describe a wretch who ties one of his human kind to a tree in such weather, leaving him to freeze, or be torn in pieces by grizzlies. You did this, Steve Williams, and I say you are a coward and a scoundrel!"

Alf poured forth his accusation with subdued vehemence, reckless of the fact that he was standing in the camp of his bitter enemies and without a weapon in his hands, but the flash of his eyes showed that just indignation had taken the place of caution.

Williams, however, could not bear the terrible accusation heaped upon him.

He arose and stood before Alf, his face pale with anger, his hands clinched for work.

"You've said what I don't allow no man ter say," he observed, "an' I'll lam you fur it till you can't see stars from turtles. Stan' back, boyees, an' make a ring, an' we'll hev ther healthiest prize fight ye ever see'd."

This was to his friends, but Alf was in no mood for an elaborate fight. Strictly speaking, he was not a fighting man. He had, however, come there for a settled purpose, and he meant to execute it at once.

He did so.

He flung up one of his hands, and a sharp crack sounded through the cabin as Steve received a flat-handed blow on his cheek which sent him reeling against the side of the room. It was like the crack of a revolver and he would have fallen but for the wall.

In a moment he was like a madman. He sprang away from the lucky support with a snarl like that of a wild animal, and then made a dash for his younger foe, his big fists sawing the air in remarkable style.

Alf was ready for him. As one of the big fists shot out he struck a light, scientific blow upward and passed it over his shoulder, and then he shot under Steve's arm. As he went his own fist went out like a flash from the shoulder, and taking Williams close to the right ear, dropped him to the floor with a shock which shook the whole cabin.

The bully was up in a moment, however, and he rushed at Alf with a volley of curses. Once more his fists swept the air, and he watched for a repetition of Alf's former trick, but the boy stood firm and gave hard blows in quick succession.

He rained them on Steve's face until the fellow grew dazed and uncertain, and could do nothing in return, and then, driving him back at his will, Alf administered the *coup de grace* with a slashing blow which landed the fellow bruised and bleeding in the corner.

Once down, he remained there.

Up to this time the mutineers had kept quiet, confident that boastful Steve could worst Alf, or half a dozen like him, but as they saw their leader really whipped and down, a shout went up from them and Sim Ryder came to the front.

"Guard the door!" he cried. "Don't let this cuss escape. We'll chaw him all up inter nothin', now we've got him."

Avalanche Alf had turned, and as he saw the wild, young roughs hemming him in, and scowling so venomously upon him, he was about to make a dash for the door, using his fists as he went, when Saul Lewis stepped to the front.

"Hold up!" cried the elder man, sharply. "Mebbe you are a tribe o' durned cannibowls, but you can't rope me in. None o' you te'ches ther boyee. Ef what he bez said is right, he ought ter punch Steve wuss than he bez done, an' I don't see no reason ter doubt him. Stan' out o' ther way an' let him pass!"

The veteran spoke in an authoritative voice, and he had gained such a hold on them as a solid man that they instinctively obeyed part of his order.

They ceased hostile demonstrations, though no one moved from the door, and some began to grumble. Sim Ryder, however, seeing his leader lying prostrate and still on the floor, considered himself called upon to uphold the bad cause.

Drawing his revolver, he leveled it at Alf's head.

"Surrender!" he shouted. "Down on yer knees an' beg fur mercy, ye white-hearted skunk!"

The guide saw that there was mischief in Sim's brain. His twinkling eyes told that all his lawlessness was let loose, and he knew it would not be in the least strange if he pulled the trigger so convenient to his hand.

Alf thought quickly. He had ventured into

the tiger's lair, and he must fight his way out. It would not be the first time he had done so, though the odds were not usually so great against him.

On the table close to his hand sat a lamp which did its share to light the room. Alf caught it up like a flash, and in a moment more it was whizzing toward Sim's head.

He had not seemed to take aim, but it went as true as any one could wish, as Sim only saved himself by quickly leaping to one side. When he did this he met a new trouble, though; his feet struck against a stool and he went over in a heap.

Alf was not slow to take advantage of the chance thus given him, and he made a dash for the door, overturning Orton as he went, and a moment later, was in the passage outside. He would have been followed had not Saul Lewis blocked the path of the younger mutineers, and revolver in hand, sworn that he would fire upon the first man who tried to pass him. He had his way in the matter; there was no pursuit.

Williams was picked up a good deal "the worse for wear." He had a bruised cheek, a bloody nose and a pair of incipient black eyes, and he was about as mad a man as stood in Colorado, though he dared not say much while Lewis was there.

In the mean while Alf returned to Rainer's cabin and reported his adventure. Captain Buck was an angry man, and he at first vowed he would lead his force at once against the mutineers, but his better judgment prevailed.

He first sent out men to dispatch the grizzly, and then settled down to await Saul Lewis's next visit.

When the man came he was informed that if another lawless deed was traced to the mutineers, they would be deprived of all food from the general supply, and, perhaps, driven from the valley; and Alf sent word to his late assailants that when they were all out of the mountains he should demand satisfaction of them.

#### CHAPTER XI.

##### FROM BAD TO WORSE.

THREE weeks passed. The people at the Horseshoe found their lives monotonous and dull enough, with two possible exceptions. Alf Browning and Betha Rainer were in good spirits the greater part of the time. Indeed, Miss Violet Rainer was shocked at what she termed their "levity."

"It does seem that with the car o' fate rattlin' so clos't ter us, there should be less gigglin' an' snickerin' goin' on," she said, with a sniff, as she looked at the young couple, who were playing with dominoes of Alf's manufacture.

"Let 'em alone, sister," said Captain Buck, with grave kindness. "Youth is ther time when pooty near all ther sunshine o' life comes along, an' ef they can furtit our troubles fur an hour or two, let 'em do it, for land's sake."

"But it seems to me they're gettin' spooney," said the old maid, sourly.

"Let 'em, ef they want ter."

"Buckley Rainer, you astonish me! Do you forget you have a darter? I'll trouble you ter remember you asked me ter train her long ago, an' I've tried ter do my duty by her—"

"So you hev, Elvira—I mean, Violet—an' I thank ye right hearty. But ef Betha is a jewel, Alf is ez squar' a young man ez one could wish fur. I like him. Ez fur what you farm ther 'spooney' part, may ther Lord pity ther man or woman who never got spooney!"

This sentiment utterly overwhelmed the maiden lady, and, as she really did not object to Betha or Alf, she withdrew from the discussion.

But, though the foot-hills guide spent a portion of his time with pretty Betha and, in her society, forgot the dark side of life, he was as active as ever, and his daily visit to the Kettle's Rim was always made, storm or shine.

The thaw for which he hoped, but did not really expect, did not come, and he began to consider a new plan of escape from the mountains.

Despite the fact that more snow was falling almost every day, it was not so difficult to move about as at first. In many places it was hardening in drifts, and Alf had been out enough with his snow-shoes so that he knew all the men could safely take the trail for the settlements.

But what of the women?

This was the question which the young guide and Captain Buck considered each day, discussing it as though it had not before been mentioned, and never arriving at a decision.

In truth, it was a hard matter upon which to



decide. They knew that Miss Violet, in particular, would be stupendously awkward upon snow-shoes, and that their progress would be slow, while there were many dangers by the way—snow-slides, extreme cold, treacherous footing, the possibility that one of the women would give out entirely, and even others.

On the other hand, a thaw and subsequent freeze might not come for a long while, and the Horseshoe would become a graveyard if they tried to remain all winter.

During these days the mutineers were very quiet. Lewis came every day for flour and salt, but no other human being trod the snow-tunnel he used, and Captain Buck and his men did not know whether all the seceders were alive or not.

The snow had reached a wonderful depth in the valley, covering the tops of all the cabins, and but for one thing a passer-by would never have suspected life existed below that white level.

In two places smoke was always curling upward above the snow, and at these points the snow was brown and somewhat melted away. These two points were two hundred feet apart. One marked the situation of Rainer's party; the other, that of the mutineers.

But not a footstep was to be seen on the surface of the snow; whatever traveling was done at all, was done by means of tunnels through the lower portion of the great mass which had fallen there, or had been blown down from the Kettle's Rim.

Finally there occurred a cold wave the like of which had never before been seen in Colorado, if the testimony of the old residents was to be believed. It fell on the peaks and valleys about the Horseshoe like an Arctic blast. It kept those who had warm houses by their firesides, and those who had to venture out did it with reluctance.

At the Horseshoe, it was comparatively little felt. Buried as they were, with only the small openings which gave them light and air, they might well have defied the elements had they possessed a full larder.

As it was, the cold wave did not materially alter their situation. Something else did, however.

Captain Rainer, fearing a protracted siege of the icy blast, took his rifle on the second day and went out to search for game. In so doing he fell from a slippery ledge and broke his leg, and, if he had not been promptly found, would have perished. Luckily for all, this did not occur, and he was soon in the house and under the care of Miss Rainer and Betha.

The fracture proved to be a simple one, and as one of the men had some surgical skill, it was soon properly set and he was on the road to recovery.

The cold weather continued, and it soon proved uncomfortable to the animals of the mountains. Many that had dug their holes but shallowly were obliged to stir about or freeze, and the hunters reported general restlessness.

Then an unexpected trouble came to Buck Rainer's party.

One night they went to bed as usual, having extinguished the lights, but leaving a roaring fire in the clay-and-rock fire-place in the corner. The blaze thus produced fell upon the roughly furnished room and showed the men lying here and there, wrapped in their blankets. The cabin was of two parts, a lower and upper room. The latter was reached by a rough ladder.

Some time passed, and then one of the men awoke. He felt sleepy, and was about to turn over and sleep again when he heard what he thought was one of his companions stirring. He opened his eyes lazily and looked to see who it was. What he saw filled him with astonishment.

It was not a man that was moving about, but a huge grizzly bear.

The miner stared in amazement; he would as soon have thought of seeing a giraffe there. Yet, a bear it was, and he was shuffling across the floor as coolly as though he was at home.

A bear? What did it mean? How in the world came he there?

The discoverer glanced toward the door. It was open, and on the threshold stood a second grizzly, which was looking about with manifest curiosity.

That was enough to satisfy the man. He had heard of bears attacking isolated camps and killing all the people, and he did not doubt but the same fate would now be theirs unless prompt action was taken to avert the danger.

He bounded to his feet with a yell calculated

to arouse his comrades and, if possible, alarm the grizzlies, and sprung toward where the weapons were kept. In the imperfect light these were not visible, but he had no doubt that they were in their usual places.

He had reached the spot, however, and, putting out his hand, found them gone—strange and startling fact. But he had no time to meditate upon it then. His comrades, alarmed by his shout, sprung up with the idea that they were attacked by the mutineers, who desired to steal the provisions.

They found even a worse enemy there.

A third grizzly had entered at the door, and when they were in there was not much spare room in the small cabin. Men and bears were at uncomfortably close quarters. The latter at once proved that they had not come on a peaceful errand.

Sounding their war-cry they turned upon the men, and there was not one there who failed to comprehend that they were mad for blood, or food, or something of that sort.

The gold-diggers were brave enough as men go, but consternation seized them and they sprung for their weapons in hot haste.

"It's no use; they're gone!"

It was the voice of the first discoverer which made the announcement, and it was enough to throw the already-frightened men into another panic.

"The attic; it's our only chance!"

It was a happy thought which some one voiced, and none too soon. The bears were advancing and they could not retreat; the loft furnished their one means of escape.

The scene which ensued was a wild one. The men sprung for the ladder in a bunch, and some fell by the way. The grizzlies followed, and it soon became evident that some one was likely to be made a victim. Seeing this, they sprung for the wall at every point where there was a projection, and they were soon hanging about like animated fruit.

The grizzlies pursued, but they were not soon enough to do any damage; spurred on by the deep growls of the brutes the miners climbed well, and they went up in one way or another—safe!

Panting, they looked down at the new masters of the cabin. There was little to interrupt their view. The floor of the loft consisted only of a few poles thrown across to lay odds and ends upon. It was strong enough to hold them, but would have been a better resting-place had there been five poles where there was one.

The grizzlies looked up at them in a way which indicated that they considered themselves wronged by being cheated of their prey. At any rate, they were angry.

"They're half-starved, an' clean out o' their heads," said one old miner, and he expressed a good deal in little.

It was something more than common hostility which made the grizzlies run about, thrust their noses into everything they could find and, failing to find anything of value to them, rear upon their hind legs and try to reach the men in the loft.

They made bad neighbors then. Snarling and growling, they tore at the walls with their ugly claws and, with glittering eyes, showed such a desire for human blood and food that the men clung tightly to their support and felt uneasy, even then.

"Starved out," repeated the previous speaker.

"It's a bad winter fur them, I allow," some one replied, "but that ain't no reason why we should let 'em feed on us."

"It's mighty funny how they found their way ter ther valley, anyhow."

"Yas, an' how did they git ther door open?"

"Yas, an' how was our weepens so curiously got out o' place?" added the man who had first tried to secure a rifle, only to find that they had been moved from their usual position. "Did they walk off on legs, or did some one move 'em on purpose?"

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE RAID OF THE GRIZZLIES.

THESE questions set the miners to thinking and it was generally agreed that the whole affair looked singular. What had brought the grizzlies through the snow-tunnel to the cabin? How had they opened the fastened door without breaking it? What had become of the weapons?

The last question was the most important of all. Properly armed, those hardy fellows would not have hesitated to begin war on the bears at once—indeed, they would not have retreated at all—but not even one rifle was visible.

"Thar's summut odd about this," said Old Rat Rugg.

The men looked at each other, suspicion in every eye, forgetful of the grizzlies for the time.

"When we went ter sleep ther weepens laid in ther usual place," said Rugg. "Who moved 'em?"

Every man declared he had not done it.

"Somebody did," said Old Rat. "Them b'ars did not take 'em up an' chuck 'em inter ther snow outside afore beginning work. No, they did not!"

Nobody denied this assertion.

"Nextly, why was ther weepens— Great Cicerol see them critters t'ar about!"

The grizzlies were "t'arin'" about in a lively way; it needed no explanation for all to see that they felt the need of food and meant to have it. Chairs and tables were knocked about as though they hoped to dislodge food somewhere thereby.

"Ez I was a-sayin'," pursued Rugg, "why was ther weepens moved?"

Nobody volunteered to tell.

"I hev a theory," said the veteran, "that Steve Williams an' his gang could tell summut about ther matter, but it wa'n't them which opened ther door. Some one on ther inside did it. Who?"

The men again looked suspiciously at each other. All were ready to believe there had been treachery, but none of the honest men of the party felt able to put their hand on the guilty party.

"I wish Buck Rainer was hyar, an' in good trim," continued Old Rat Rugg.

The wish was generally echoed, for it was their opinion that Captain Buck was the most competent man in Colorado, and some one was certainly needed to cut the Gordian knot of their situation; some one to tell them how they were to escape from their novel imprisonment and expel the bears from the cabin.

Speaking of Rainer reminded them that in the next cabin was the injured man and two women, with no guard except one boy, Avalanche Alf. How were they faring? Why was there no sound from that quarter?

It was generally agreed again that it was odd and suspicious that dead silence reigned in that direction. What did it mean?

"Kin it be ther grizzlies went thar fu'st an' killed 'em all?"

Old Rat came near creating a panic among the faithful by asking the question, and then the excitement increased. Those hardy fellows were not men to shrink from any danger, and it became clear that they ought to do something to learn what had happened in the other cabin. They were devoted friends of Buck Rainer, and they almost idolized Betha. They must not be left to their fate, if indeed they were still alive.

But how were they to be got at?

"Ef I had a firebrand, I'd agree ter cl'ar out ther hull caboodle o' 'em," said Shine Tucker.

"But ye ain't got ther brand," said Rugg, dryly.

"No, an' that ain't ther wu'st on't."

"You can't go down while ther b'ars are thar."

"Can't I make a hole through ther ruff, an' so git ter ther cabin?"

"We are a story above them."

"Wal, I kin go down."

"Down among ther b'ars? Yas!"

Despite this gloomy prediction Shine was inclined to stick to his plan, but something now occurred on the lower floor which attracted all attention.

The uneasy grizzlies, in tearing about the place, succeeded in breaking open the door which separated the supply-room from the main one, attracted no doubt by the scent of fresh meat, and they were soon among these treasures.

The scene which ensued baffles description. Up to this time five bears had made themselves seen, and all went for the food with avidity. They tore down the suspended meat and ate it with ravenous haste, but it only seemed to sharpen their appetites, and they looked for more. Barrels and boxes were turned over and their contents scattered, and the dismayed miners raved wildly as they saw their cherished stores—articles which could not be replaced short of the settlements—scattered about.

One grizzly went into the flour-barrel head first, seeming to be impressed by the idea that a restaurant existed at the bottom. He came out covered from nose to shoulders with flour,



which made him as white as a polar bear, while the remainder of the precious article was scattered widely on the floor.

It was a calamity which only those who have been similarly placed can understand; it bade fair to reduce the party to a flesh diet entirely.

The bears seemed to take a vicious pleasure in what they were doing, and in a short time not even a fragment remained of all the store so prized and so jealously guarded.

"I'd give my summer's gold for a rifle jest now," said Old Rat, grating his teeth.

"I'm goin' ter do somethin'," said Shine, suddenly.

"What?"

"Drive 'em out."

"Ther grizzlies?"

"Yas."

"How'll you do it?"

"Use a firebrand."

"How in blazes will ye git ther brand?"

"Easy enough, ef you fellers will help me. I want ye ter take me by ther heels an' lower me head fu'st, an' in this way I'll git hold o' a brand."

It was a bold scheme, and the majority of the men said it would not work, but Shine united the recklessness of youth with his real bravery, and he did not hesitate to try it. It was found that an extension was necessary, however, and they took off their coats, made two impromptu ropes, attached them to his ankles, and all was ready.

Half of the men went to the opposite side of the loft to attract the attention of the grizzlies, which were still tearing about like unloosed lunatics, and the risky game was tried.

The decoys exposed themselves in such a way that the bears congregated at one point, and then Shine was carefully and silently lowered.

When he found himself thus dangling he began to realize that he had undertaken a risky work, and, by looking through his arms, he saw the open-mouthed grizzlies wildly trying to get at the men above. They meant mischief, and if they saw him they would be liable to do mischief.

But the adventurer had been run quickly down, and as he came near the smoldering fire he seized a brand. A weapon was at last in his hand, and none too soon; for, seeing him, the grizzlies wheeled and rushed toward him with growls which seemed to him as loud as the rumbling of thunder.

He grasped a second brand.

"Pull!" he then cried.

The men pulled, but owing either to their undue eagerness or the poor tying of the knot, the coats slipped where they were tied to Shine's ankles, and his blood grew decidedly chilly in feeling as his feet slipped through.

There was a slight shock, and the miners in the loft were horrified as they saw Shine lying flat on the floor, with the grizzlies rushing toward him.

If the truth is told, he was not less disturbed than they, but he had seen enough of wild life not to let any chance escape him. He bounded to his feet like a flash and faced them. There was no other way; to attempt to gain the ladder would be sure death.

Up he came, with the brands still in his hand, and he faced the enemy unwaveringly.

Just then, however, there was a new turn of affairs. A step sounded at the door, and those who looked down saw Avalanche Alf standing there, gazing at the grizzlies in bewilderment.

It was plain he had not been prepared for their presence.

Some freak which we will not pause to analyze turned the beasts' attention from Shine to the new-comer, and with one accord the five monsters turned upon him.

"Run!" shouted Old Rat Rugg, at the top of his voice.

It was advice not to be disregarded, if the foot-hills guide wished to save his life, and he turned at the word, but not with the wild haste a tenderfoot would have shown. He remembered that when, awakening from sound sleep, he heard some sound in the larger cabin and came out to investigate it, he had left the outer door unfastened.

Unless it was at once secured, the grizzlies might enter and kill Captain Rainer.

As he crossed the threshold, however, some heavy object fell upon his head, and he staggered and fell against the wall of snow, just as the foremost bear leaped through the doorway.

Even then the young guide suspected that he had been struck by a human hand, but as he fell, the snow gave way partially, and he disappeared from view in the feathery mass.

Thus it was that he did not see the bear, looking about with anger-inflamed eyes, discover and rush upon the person who had dealt the blow.

This person made a great effort to escape, but he did not succeed. The long claws of Old Eph caught in his garments, and as he was drawn to an embrace which he knew was fatal, he uttered a scream of terror so long and loud that it chilled the blood of those who heard it.

Shine Tucker had rallied the moment the grizzlies turned from himself toward Alf, and had started to his rescue, brand in hand, but as this wild cry sounded he had no choice but to think that he had met with a violent death.

For the first time in many years Shine lost heart for a moment. He was on a level with five grizzlies, with only a firebrand as a weapon, and it occurred to him that the best thing he could do was to save himself.

Accordingly, he dropped the brand, made a rush for the ladder, and went up as quickly as possible.

"Why did ye leave ther fire?" quickly asked Old Rat.

"Because I don't hanker ter be chewed up. Poor Alf is gone—didn't ye hear his death-yell?"

"Hear it? Nobody could help it, an' I'm right sorry fur him, but—Shine, go down an' bring up that brand right away, will ye?"

Too late! Two of the grizzlies turned back, glanced around as though wondering what had become of the man with the brand, and then directed their gaze upward again.

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### THE HEROINE OF THE CABIN.

BUCK RAINER was recovering as rapidly from the effects of his broken limb as could be expected, but such an injury cannot heal in a day, and he was practically a helpless man the night of which we write.

All the previous day he had been carefully cared for by Betha and Miss Violet, while Avalanche Alf's cheerful conversation did a good deal to improve his spirits. When he fell asleep it was with a peaceful feeling, and a conviction that all would end for the best.

He was peculiarly awakened, and as he became conscious he heard the last echo of a wild, agonized scream. It died away in a moment, but it was so awful that the veteran started up in his bed and only fell back when a fierce pain caught him in the leg.

What did it mean?

He asked himself the question in great anxiety, and then glanced toward the couch where Alf Browning was accustomed to sleep. The fire had become somewhat low, and Captain Buck could not see the form of the foot-hills guide.

"Alf!" he called.

There was no reply.

"Alf!"

He called again, but silence still reigned.

At the first call he had felt no uneasiness, but when his second attempt met with no better success he again tried to start up. He knew Alf was a light sleeper; he had never before failed to respond readily; and the veteran was quick-witted enough to connect the boy's absence with the scream he had heard.

His absence, for a closer view showed Rainer that the bed was untenanted.

He was about to call to Miss Violet when the outside door opened and a shuffling sound followed. His face brightened, for he forgot the cry and believed Alf had safely returned, and he uttered a sigh of relief.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

There was no answer, and Buck looked more closely. By the light of the fire he saw a strange and startling sight. No human was that which stood on the threshold, but a huge grizzly.

Captain Buck stared in amazement. Did he really see what he seemed to, or was all this the creation of a dream?

The grizzly had paused to see what manner of a place he had intruded in, but it seemed to satisfy him, and he began a further advance. He had, however, had a share of the food in the supply cabin and was not so voracious as at first, and his step was slow and ponderous, and he seemed actuated more by curiosity than aught else.

Buck was quick-witted enough to perceive that his safety lay in keeping quiet. Avalanche Alf was not at hand to help him; he was utterly helpless himself, not having any weapon in hand; while a call would first of all bring the women upon the scene—to their death, probably.

Better that he should die alone, Buck reasoned,

than that Betha should suspect the danger he was in. So he lay quiet.

Old Eph went about his tour of inspection systematically, and his inquiring nose was poked into every place that he chanced upon. A mere chance saved Captain Buck. Believing he gained warmth thereby, the veteran had placed all his beds high, and as a result, Old Eph walked directly under the man and gave no sign that he knew any one was there.

Rainer did not venture to stir, but it was the quietness of bravery. He was reviewing every point of the case, and he would have given a good deal to get word to his men.

Remembering the scream he had heard, he believed Alf had ventured outside and came to grief. If this was the case, his chances of escape from a violent death were not numerous.

The grizzly went on and only started once, when the outer door was closed by the draught of air. Unknown to Rainer, this freed him from yet greater danger and the presence of more of Eph's species.

The case suddenly assumed a new and startling aspect, however. The inner door creaked, and as Buck turned that way, fresh fear assailing him, he saw Betha standing on the threshold.

"Back!" exclaimed Captain Buck, hurriedly. "For Heaven's sake retreat, an' come hyar no more! D'ye see ther grizzly, gal?"

Betha did see it, but she was gazing more in wonder than in fear.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed; "how did he get in here?"

"Never mind that, gal, but heed what I tell ye. Close ther door an' pile all ther goods ag'in it; don't open it an' atom till ye hear my voice callin' ye— Good Lord! be quick, gal!"

The grizzly had not failed to turn an investigating ear and eye toward pretty Betha, and he had come to the conclusion that she was a very desirable acquaintance, and started that way when Buck sounded the alarm.

Betha was not slow of comprehension, and she sprang back and closed the door with a slam.

"Thank goodness!" said the veteran. "She's all right, an' I reckon I kin bar whatever comes along. But I do wish somebody'd show up. I'll yell ef Eph looks this way."

Eph did not look that way. On the contrary, he found himself puzzled by the fact that both girl and doorway had disappeared, and he knew not what to make of it. He was hunting for the opening, and Rainer was lying very quiet, when the one was astonished and the other horrified to see Betha reappear.

She did not come empty-handed as before, but flinging the door wide open, stood there with a face like a border heroine of old and a rifle firmly clasped.

"Back!" cried Rainer, reading her purpose. "For ther Lord's sake, what be you— Oh! oh!"

He broke off with a dismal groan as she deliberately raised the weapon and took aim at the grizzly, which was looking at her viciously, but he had time to say no more. The girl pulled the trigger, and the cabin seemed to shake from top to bottom from the report which followed.

Captain Buck's blood seemed to turn to ice, and he looked with wild eyes, expecting to see his priceless child torn in pieces, but, instead, Old Eph reeled back with a roar of pain, seemed to try to clap his paws to his head, and then reeled over with a crash.

Once more Rainer shouted to the girl to retreat, but she did nothing of the kind. She had reached back for a second rifle she had brought as far as the door, but as she lifted it, she saw that Old Eph did not require more lead.

Her first shot had wound him up decisively. When Rainer realized this fact he grew somewhat excited.

"Hurrah!" he said, "you've done what more than one old borderman can't boast on; you've killed a grizzly at a single shot. It takes a cool head an' a good narve ter do that—mightily so, by ther Eternal. You're a good 'un, gal. Where'd you hit him?"

"Right in the eye," Betha replied, coolly.

"That's ther place ter do it. But, see hyar; thar's summut wrong 'round hyar. Just open ther door a bit, an' see what's goin' on out thar."

The veteran could hear unusual sounds, and he knew something unusual was occurring.

Betha obeyed, but she closed the door more quickly than she opened it.

"There are two more bears there," she announced.



"Be you sure?"

"Yes. The door of the other cabin is open, and the light shines out plainly. The grizzlies are near the door, and seem to be eating something."

"An' thar's no sign o' ther men?"

"No."

Rainer's heart grew sick with a terrible fear. The strange silence of his men; the scream which had awakened him; and the something which the bear was eating; all went to give him a terrible suspicion.

Were he and the women the sole survivors of the devoted party?

"I'd give ev'ry dollar I possess fur a pair o' sound legs now," he almost groaned.

"Tell me what you want done," clearly said the girl, as she began to reload the gun.

"You—you kin do nothin'."

"Don't you believe it, father Rainer. Do you suppose your daughter is a coward? Tell me what to do."

But Captain Buck still hesitated. He would have hesitated had he been armed himself, for there was a mystery about affairs outside which was strange and ominous.

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### AVALANCHE ALF'S ADVENTURES.

WHEN Alf Browning was knocked into the mass of snow, as before related, he did not sustain any real injury, and he kept his wits about him in a commendable way. He knew, even then, that the blow he had received came from a human hand, and as he had been on the watch for hostile work from the mutineers, he remembered them at once.

If they were about it behooved him to use due caution, and when he staggered to his feet, brushing away the snow from his eyes, he was not sorry that more snow was between him and the tunnel.

He cautiously made a hole which served to supply him with air, and at the same time give him a view of the tunnel. But looking out he saw the cabin, with the light falling through the doorway.

Close at hand were two of the grizzlies, one of which was rolling a dark form which Alf rightly suspected to be a man.

He felt sure the luckless fellow was dead, but he gazed with a species of fascination until a revolution of the body brought the face where the light fell upon it. Then Alf recognized it.

He saw Sam Orton, still and dead.

It was no particular shock, for he had no reason to love the man, as will be remembered, and he shrewdly suspected that if Orton had not tried to kill him—Alf—he would not have fallen into the grizzly's terrible grasp.

What he saw, however, convinced him that the mutineers were again on the war-path. Perhaps they had had something to do with decoying the grizzlies to the valley, but, be that as it might, they undoubtedly knew they were there.

The young guide thought quickly, but of only one thing was he sure; he was needed in the smaller cabin. He had left the door so that a slight pressure would serve to open it. The grizzlies might enter there and do terrible work.

About the larger cabin there was a mystery. Why was all so silent there? Could it be all the miners were dead? He did not believe that. He knew the bears could not have dispatched them without creating an alarm, and, bad as the mutineers were, he did not believe they would enter on wholesale assassination while Saul Lewis was with them.

Due meditation convinced Alf that the sooner he regained Rainer's cabin the better it would be for all. But how was it to be done? Clearly, he could not go by way of the passage while the bears were there.

At this juncture he remembered that there was a small window in the rear wall of the cabin. This had for weeks looked out on a wall of snow, but if he could reach the place there was nothing to prevent his entrance.

And he resolved to reach it.

Turning his face east he began forcing his passage, using his hands and knife as effectually as possible.

It was no easy work, despite the fact that the snow had fallen so lightly and feather-like, but, like most people who work in earnest, he made some headway, and he gradually worked around toward the desired quarter.

Once, on his way, he heard the report of a rifle, but it sounded dull and far-away, and he was unable to locate it and he accepted it as a sign, that the miners were at last at work and went on briskly.

He approached the window at last.

As he did so he met with a surprise. Where he had expected to find solid snow he suddenly emerged into a passage. He paused in surprise, thinking he had lost his bearings and forced his way back to the tunnel, but despite the total darkness, his hands soon informed him that he was in a place much narrower than the tunnel.

More than this, if he had not lost his bearings, this passage ran at right angles with the other.

Before he had time to investigate the matter there was a sound at the left and, unless he erred, some one came stumbling over the snow toward him.

Alf began to be a good deal perplexed and confused, but he held his knife well forward and awaited developments.

Another half minute sufficed to satisfy him that the approaching thing was a human being, and then it stumbled and fell.

"Good gracious me! I shall break my neck!"

It was a shrill, feminine voice which made this startling assertion, and Alf was not troubled to recognize Miss Violet Rainer's. It was, however, a most welcome sound, and he hastened to her side and began assisting her to rise.

"Miss Violet—"

"Let me alone, you red-handed assassinator an' reptyle!" exclaimed the good lady, vehemently. "I s'pose you want to cut me off in the bloom o' my youth, same ez you hev Betha, but—"

By this time the youth had succeeded in getting a few words in to her notice, and she suddenly changed her tone.

"Laud o' massy, is that you, Alfred?" she cried.

"Yes, yes. What is the matter?"

"They've stole Betha!"

"Stolen Betha! Great heavens! who has done it? Where did they go? When—"

Alf was getting very much excited for him, for he was horrified at the idea of pretty Betha being in peril, but Miss Rainer broke in on his excited questioning.

"Steve Williams did it. He's ther mean, audacious snake in ther grass, an' ef I were a man I'd strike him right in the face!"

Which threat she seemed to think a blood-thirsty one.

"Where have they gone? speak quickly!" Alf said, trying to calm himself.

"This way. I am in pursuit, for thar ain't nobody else ter go. Ther men are all dead!"

This last assertion was a startling one, but Miss Violet persisted in it. She said Steve had come with his comrades, and that a general fight had followed. She was of the opinion that Captain Buck had shot a man before he succumbed, but he had finally been beaten down. She had herself tried to get help from the larger cabin, but when she went for it she found all the other men dead—murdered.

And in the end Betha was carried away.

Even then Alf suspected that her story might be shorn of some of its members and still be strong enough to cover the ground, but it seemed clear that Betha was abducted and he resolved to lose no time in going to her rescue.

The passage in which he stood was evidently one dug by Steve Williams to get at the rear of the cabin, and all things went to show how desperately in earnest he was. Alf knew he had long been an admirer of Betha, and it seemed he had at last thrown off all reserve and made a bold effort to have her, by foul means now that all others had failed.

He declared that he would rescue her, in so vehement a manner that Miss Violet was alarmed, and when he suggested that she return to the cabin she did not object. She had mechanically taken a revolver when she started out, and as it was loaded, Alf felt more resolute when it was in his own possession.

He was then ready to move against Steve.

When Miss Rainer had returned he went on through the passage. He had expected it was soon to join the larger one, but it did not, and all things went to show that Steve had long been at work on his plot.

The tunnel was a mere thread under the snow, just wide enough to admit of the passage of one person, but it led away straight toward the quarters of the mutineers, and Alf had no doubt as to where it would end.

He had not been at the place since he entered and administered the lesson to Steve Williams, but he knew the arrangement of everything and was prepared to make the most of it.

Finally the passage made an elbow to the left and joined the main one, and he knew he must be near the cabin of the mutineers. Consequently,

it occurred to him that caution would not be out of place.

If the mutineers were desperate enough to steal Betha, they were enough so to kill a man they had once before tried to put out of the way.

Alf thought and acted quickly, and, lying flat on the hard-trodden snow, he began to crawl forward.

The situation was a peculiar one. He was in a tunnel seven feet high and half as wide. It was wholly of snow, and, above, was a mass of an unknown depth. The few openings did not admit of much air, but not a great deal was needed there, and he felt comfortable enough, if he was crawling on such a surface.

As he went forward the sound of voices soon reached his ears, but all was so dark that he could see no one. He crawled near enough to learn that two persons were standing in the tunnel, but he could not discover more without running too much risk of discovery.

Finally they turned and went away, and he arose to a stooping position and followed, his weapons held ready for use.

Something darker than the snow was soon seen, and he knew it was a cabin. Into this the unknown went, and Alf was left to consider his next move. Before he could think a great deal, a single man emerged from the cabin and approached him.

Discovery seemed certain, but Alf pressed closely to the side of the tunnel, and lying flat, resolved to give the man a chance to pass if he would. He courted no hostile encounter.

Whether he would escape one would soon be settled, for the unknown was close at hand.

#### CHAPTER XV.

##### EVERYBODY TAKES A TURN.

AVALANCHE ALF'S prospects of escaping discovery seemed very small, but luck was with him. The man went past without observing the dark form pressed back against the snow, and going a few yards, took position in such a way that the guide easily comprehended that he was there as a sentinel.

The youth could hardly avoid chuckling; it was the old story of locking the barn after the horse was stolen.

He did not stop long to watch the sentinel, however, but, rising partially, moved on toward the cabin.

There was a light there, and the sound of voices within which told that the mutineers were astir, and as there was an open space in front of the window, he crept forward and approached the glass.

No one was there to see or molest him, and he arose cautiously and looked within. He saw the mutineers—four of them, Williams, Ryder, Wilson and Pratt. It was the former who was the central light of the party, as usual. He was speaking as Alf looked in.

"If necessary, we will make a fight on't ter ther death," he said, "but I don't reckon it is. Ef them b'ars leave a grease-spot o' Buck's party I'm a fool, an' ef it should come ter a pinch, ain't we got all ther guns?"

He pointed to a pile of rifles in one corner, and Alf was sure he recognized some of them as lately belonging to Rainer's adherents.

"Tain't likely they'd come at us squar'-toed," said Pratt, complainingly, "but in this land o' snow they kin easily surprise us, ez we surprised them. I say we've got a durned big job on our hands ter watch the gal an' Buck's friends, too. We should 'a' killed them when we had a chance."

"You didn't dare ter go in arter ther rifles, let alone doin' ther killin'," said Steve, angrily.

"Sam Orton went in, an' whar is he?" Pratt defiantly asked.

"That's ther question," agreed Wilson.

Steve looked at them with increasing anger.

"You two are as bad as Saul Lewis," he declared. "I wish you was a hundred miles away—"

"So do I," said Wilson.

"Wal, you ain't, and ther question is, will you side with me or with Buck Rainer, who's prob'ly e't up by a b'ar afore now?"

"I said I'd side with you, an' I meant it, but I don't like ther idee o' gittin' my head knocked off."

"I tell you ther grizzlies will fix Buck an' all his men," said Steve, more mildly.

Avalanche Alf had listened long enough. Happily, there was division in the ranks of the enemy. Wilson and Pratt were but lukewarm, Orton was dead, Lewis could not be depended on, and Williams, Ryder and Drake were left as the only radicals.



Alf, however, was thinking of something else. He eyed the rifles stacked in one corner, and his gaze was a greedy one. Moreover, he noticed that an inner door of the cabin was fastened. Where was Betha? Where, if not held captive there?

The youth determined to know the truth. The second room of the cabin was small, and did not admit of much working, but he noticed that the whole building was yielding to the weight of snow upon it and was in a decidedly weak condition.

The same trouble had occurred at the Rainer quarters, but had been looked after and prevented by the captain.

Alf moved forward and laid hold of a section of the cabin, hoping to move it, but a very brief effort satisfied him it was useless. Weak it might be, but not enough so for the success of his plan.

While he was trying to think what he should do next there was a pounding sound which seemed to proceed from the next cabin, and the mutineers looked at each other.

"Lewis has waked up," said Ryder.

"Yas," said Steve, dubiously, "an' now, what shall we do with him?"

"You shet him in, an' I reckon you kin explain matters ter him," said Pratt, curtly.

"I reckon I'm able ter, you coyote!" said Steve, angrily. "Ez fur you, you'd better go an' put yer head ter soak!"

He strode out and toward the other cabin, followed by Sim Ryder, while Pratt and Wilson went to the door.

It was a chance Avalanche Alf did not neglect, and he hastily pushed up the window and entered the cabin. Striding forward he secured a rifle and two more revolvers, and then he turned to the fastened door. Flinging it open, he looked within.

He saw a small, lighted room, and, seated by a low bed, her hands tied behind her and tears silently falling—Betha Rainer!

She had looked up coldly, but only his quick, warning gesture saved her from uttering a betraying cry as she saw who was there. He was quickly by her side, and one stroke severed her bonds. She was free, though still in the enemy's camp.

"Not a word, Betha," said the boy, pressing her hand reassuringly. "I am here to rescue you, and I'll do it if possible, but we must be very careful. Follow me at once, and we will go while we can, for— Too late!"

He broke off, and then closed the door again as men entered the cabin. Leaving a crevice, he looked through and saw that the mutineers had been joined by Saul Lewis, and that the elder man's face wore an angry look.

"Well, what are you goin' ter do about it?" insolently asked Steve. "I want you ter understand I am not ther clam you take me ter be. Sand is what's wanted in Colorado, not cant, like what you give us. Ef you don't like our style, go out on ther mount'n' an' hump fer Leadville."

Saul looked as though he longed to strike the fellow to his feet, and Alf, who correctly believed nothing to be more despicable than the insolence of youth to mature age, hoped it would not happen, but the veteran kept his temper.

"Never mind any advice, my callow chicken," said he. "I am able to go an' come without your help, an' I shall do it, too. But I sha'n't leave ther Hoss-shoe. No, sir. I mean ter stay hyar, ez one of Buck's party. I've been a fool long enough, an' I'm goin' ter him an' say ez much. I wonder that I've held ter you so long. I knowed some time ago that 'twas you who stole our hosses when we were jest a-goin' ter leave hyar, an' that we owe our captivity hyar ter you."

Steve seemed somewhat confused by this accusation, but he soon rallied.

"Wal, what on't?" he insolently asked.

"Simply this: You deserve ter be shot fur doin' ez you hev. I don't think o' ther men; ther Lord knows I don't; but thar is helpless women hyar who may never see ther towns ag'in; who may starve hyar in these valleys. Ef they do, it's your fault!"

"I'll take care o' ther young 'un, an' ther ole one ain't o' no consequence, anyhow."

"Poor fool! you can't even take care o' yourself. Why, you was fooled at ther start. You hired two hoss-thieves who was lurkin' around ter steal ther hosses, an' they did their work so well that, instead o' hidin' 'em in a gulch a few miles away, ez you ordered, they cleaned out entirely with 'em. That's what become o' ther hosses, ez I've found out, an' I cuss ther hour I sided with you. What new mischief be you in?

Why was I shut inter my cabin, and what's been goin on, anyway?"

Lewis looked about suspiciously, and Avalanche Alf breathed more freely as he saw that he had at last become completely disgusted with the ways of the young villain who led the mutineers.

Before Steve could answer, however, there was a cry of alarm outside, in a voice which all recognized as that of Zeke Drake, and the latter appeared on the threshold.

"Ther grizzlies!" he cried, in a shrill voice. "Ther grizzlies is hyar—"

The words had barely passed his lips when a huge, brown paw appeared beside him and, falling on his shoulder, jerked him back out of sight even more quickly than he had appeared.

A yell of terror followed, but it ended in one of agony, and all understood that Drake had met his last peril.

Almost at the same moment, a second grizzly appeared in the doorway.

"Ther rifles!" shouted Steve Williams. "For ther Lord's sake, be quick!"

There was need enough of it, as every one knew, for there was every evidence that the bears were on the war-path, and Avalanche Alf closed the door of the inner room just as he saw Lewis, Williams and the other mutineers spring for their weapons. He hurriedly dragged everything of size against it as a barricade.

"There is going to be a terrible time out there," he said, addressing Betha.

His words were followed by the crack of a rifle, and then came a roar, plainly of grizzly origin, which almost shook the cabin. What ensued defies description. Other rifle-reports were mingled with other roars, growls, snarls, shouts, oaths—it was a perfect Bedlam; and poor Betha closed her hands over her ears and, pale and trembling, sought the shelter of Alf's arms.

That very night she had "killed her grizzly," but the uproar outside was something new and terrible.

Alf did not decline to protect her with his arms—it was rather agreeable, of the two—but he did not forge; to hold his weapons ready, so that if the door was broken in by any chance he would be ready for fighting.

In the outer room a most desperate fight was raging. It had plainly become hand-to-hand, and he judged the men were getting the worst of it. He was of a heroic and chivalrous nature, and the temptation to go to their aid was strong, but when he looked at Betha he felt that he had no right to endanger himself until she was safe.

But an interruption came in another shape. There was a louder, more defiant shout, as though several voices were blended as one; a clear command, and then a rattling rifle discharge.

"Hurrah!" cried Alf, "our friends are here!"

They were there, and making matters hot for the bears; that same became plain; but the confusion rather increased of the two for a while. Then it died away, and triumphant voices were alone heard.

Alf, however, recognized that of Old Rat Rugg, and he quickly opened the door a little. He saw the old miner and Shine Tucker, together with other men from Captain Rainer's division, and the grizzlies were scattered here and there in death.

Of Steve Williams's party only two were at first visible. Saul Lewis and Tom Wilson were standing at one side, bruised and bleeding, but Saul came forward.

"Rat, you seem ter lead hyar," he said, "an' I wanten surrender. I've been a durned old fool, but I reckon I've suffered enough fur it. Don't be too hard on me, fur thar's wuss wovnds on my pride than on my body."

"Tain't fur me ter answer," said Rugg. "Buck Rainer will do that, an' I s'pose a good 'eal will depend on whether you kin show us leetle Betha alive an' wal, or not."

Avalanche Alf led the girl out, and a cheer arose from the men. All loved their captain's daughter, and they shouted none the less emphatically because they were rough and ready to the bone.

The reunion was a pleasant one, and there seemed little fear of more trouble from the mutineers. Zeke Drake and Sim Ryder were dead, Lewis and Wilson were very glad to surrender, and Williams and Pratt were gone.

Steve had shown his devotion to his cause by promptly deserting his companions when the bears attacked them, and though Low Pratt seemed to have gone with him, even Wilson was feeling too bitter to ever follow his lead again. It was soon learned, from Tom, that

Steve had decoyed the grizzlies into the Horseshoe for the purpose of destroying Captain Buck's party, and that he had stolen the rifles of the party to make them utterly helpless.

But the plot had miscarried; the boom had proved a boomerang; and while Orton, Ryder and Drake were dead, and the mutineer party broken up, not one of Rainer's men had lost his life.

Had not the more thoughtful of the party remembered that the grizzlies had destroyed nearly all their provisions, they would have been quite happy as they returned to the larger cabin.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE SNOW-SHOE TRAIL.

PEACE reigned once more in the Horseshoe, and there was no hostile party existing through Captain Buck's clemency. Under the snow three men lay buried, and a rude board bore the names of Drake, Orton and Ryder. Lewis and Wilson were doing all they could to show that they repented of their past folly, and Saul, at least, was cordially welcomed back in the fold.

Steve Williams and Low Pratt had completely disappeared. Their trail was found leading out on the Kettle's Rim, but it looked as though Steve had given up his plans at last. It was commonly remarked that they would never see him again, but Avalanche Alf believed he read the fellow's nature better, and that he would never be satisfied until he had wreaked his spite on his rival.

Matters looked decidedly blue for the miners. Nearly all their flour and other stores had been destroyed by the grizzlies, and though enough was left in Rainer's cabin to keep him during his convalescence, there was but a sorry portion for the others.

The exact state of affairs was kept from Captain Buck. Despite Miss Violet's assertion that all had been killed, the veteran had received no worse injury than a blow on his head which temporarily stunned him; but he was not in condition to be worried. It was best that he should be on his feet before he knew that he, alone, of the whole party was getting the usual allowance of flour and like food.

But the other men grappled with the grim facts of the case, and many a troubled consultation took place. It was generally agreed that they must soon leave the valley, and make an attempt to get out of the mountains; but go at that time they could not, even had Buck been able.

The extreme cold kept them actual prisoners. Avalanche Alf made frequent journeys to the Kettle's Rim, and studied the weather more than ever. He longed to see signs of a thaw, but no such signs were visible. He did suggest, however, that snow-shoes be made for the entire party, and it was properly done.

Compelled to live on such a scanty allowance, life in the valley became almost unbearable. Even to the men it had once been novel and pleasant, covered over with snow as they were; but the openings for light and air, which had once seemed all-sufficient, were now voted far from being so, and general discontent existed.

Luckily for all, Rainer improved with almost marvelous rapidity, and as his mind was as active as ever, he did more than any other living man could to keep up the general courage and direct matters aright.

But when he was on his feet, and had been told their exact situation so far as food was concerned, a new cloud appeared on the horizon. Alf heard of it through Old Rat Rugg.

"Young chap," said the veteran, "you're a pusson o' sand, but be you good at conundrums?"

Alf smiled.

"I'm afraid not, but why do you ask?"

"S'posen game should disappear so that we couldn't git any at all?"

"Then we would be in a bad fix, but there is no danger of that in these mountains."

"Wal, what ef our powder should give out so that we couldn't shoot at all?"

Alf started. There was that in Old Rugg's voice which told that he was not joking.

"Is the supply really running low?"

"Condemned low, boyee; so low that thar is only a very leetle left. We'll soon be wholly out. Arter that, how kin we git even meat ter eat?"

"I dare say we can trap enough in dead-falls, or like contrivances, so that we shall not starve, but the matter is a serious one, as you say."

"Right you be, fur 'tain't no easy job ter trap enough food fur sech a party ez this, new you bet."



"Mr. Rugg, you are right, and I'd give my last dollar to see our way out of this. Trouble and suffering are ahead of us if we stay here. But how can we get out? Such a mass of snow as there is at present was never before seen in Colorado's mountains, and the place is making itself a name for deep snows every winter. We must get out, however, or, I fear, die here to a man."

"An' all this is owin' ter Steve Williams," said Old Rat, working his jaws on his tobacco like a threshing-machine. "Ef he hadn't stole our hosses, all would 'a' been wal. Ez'tis, likely ez not we'll all die hyar. But afore I croak I'd like ter git my hand on Steve's neck once; I jist would, by ther great Jehosopha Jones!"

And Old Rat smote himself forcibly on the thigh.

Rain!

Yes, there was no doubt about it. It was falling on peak and valley, and Avalanche Alf, who stood on the Kettle's Rim, felt like dancing for joy. The snow was being thoroughly soaked at the top, and as a freeze must surely follow, there was great hope that the snow would harden sufficiently to uphold the weight of men. If it did, the Horseshoe would soon be left behind, for Captain Rainer was at last able to travel.

And all worked as they hoped. Rain fell steadily for nearly twenty-four hours, and then the wind abruptly changed and the thaw caught cold. The rainfall ceased, the air grew sharp and cold, the snow hardened, and when another day dawned it was found hard enough to bear any weight they might require it to uphold.

They were ready for it, and, when breakfast was eaten, the party left the Horseshoe on their eventful journey. Such food as they had, blankets and other articles, including snow-shoes, were taken, and the little band had an appearance decidedly like that of emigrants.

It was a sober departure, for they were not sure they were doing wisely. No one knew what was ahead of them. Avalanche Alf was capable of guiding them the whole distance safely, but the fickle weather might change and leave them in the lurch.

What the young guide most feared was a snow-slide. True, they seldom occurred at that time of year, but if the weather made the change which he suspected it would, judging by the "signs" taught him by his old friend, the hermit, it would not be in the least strange.

We need scarcely explain what a Colorado snow-slide is. For several seasons past, the press has been frequently called upon to record such mishaps which have been attended with great loss of life, and Alf knew the region well enough to fear just that thing.

Consequently, he hoped to see the cold weather hold.

During that day it did, and excellent progress was made. Betha and Miss Violet were winning many compliments, and when the party laid down that night many of them were in high spirits.

But Alf took Captain Buck aside, and the latter saw that the boy's face was grave.

"What now?" he quickly asked.

"Have you seen nothing wrong?"

"No."

"The wind has changed."

"Changed? By hokey! so 't'as. That's bad, but—Wal, what d'ye make on't?"

"If it holds in the present quarter we shall have more rain."

Captain Buck nodded quickly. There was no occasion to explain more to him. Both he and Alf knew that the crust of the snow would soon soften in such a case, and, at the least, they would have to continue their journey on snow-shoes, menaced by the constant danger of a "slide."

Rainer considered the advisability of calling up the party, so they could resume their way and make as much progress as possible while the hardened surface lasted, but as he saw Betha sleeping in Miss Violet's arms he lacked the nerve to disturb her.

"It won't make no real difference," he said, "an' ther good Lord knows she's been sore taxed ter kiver so much ground ter-day. We'll let her sleep!"

When morning dawned no rain had yet fallen, but the air was much milder, and black clouds were rolling up against the sky.

Avalanche Alf urged an instant departure and rapid progress. They were in the midst of many peaks, and a country in every way suitable for snow-slides, and he had no desire to be caught there for any length of time.

They went on over a steadily-softening surface, and, when they began breaking through

badly, put on their snow-shoes and continued their way.

At noon the expected rain-fall began, and began, too, with a vigor which put further progress out of the question. Reluctantly enough they were obliged to seek what shelter they could find, but that was wholly different from what they desired.

Avalanche Alf was the most troubled of any person there, simply because he knew their danger better than any other person. He looked up at the peak which reared its top above them, and at the soft mass of snow which lay on its side, and hoped the rain would be a short one.

But all his skill in weather prophecy went to tell him it would not be a brief one, and as he looked at Betha he felt that he would give his last dollar if she was in a place of safety.

And, indifferent to his wishes, the rain poured steadily down.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE SNOW-SLIDE.

THE night which followed was one of the dreariest in the experience of any of the party. The rain still fell, the snow was turning into slush, and in many places the once-dry gulches were turned into rivers.

Morning dawned and found the rain lessening, but the first danger was now menacing the party. Alf, who was never idle, discovered that if there was not a change of base they would soon be flooded out. A dammed gulch had formed a pond which was steadily setting back, and in a short time it would cover their place of refuge.

There was no help for it; they must go, and they put on their snow-shoes and moved accordingly. It was a wet and dreary journey.

Alf led the way across the side of the peak, always watching the higher land, but it seemed that one thing escaped his notice, for Captain Buck came to his side with a puzzled face.

"Alf, boyee, what do you s'pose Saul Lewis says?"

"What?"

"That he has see'd Steve Williams."

"Seen Steve?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Back hyar a bit, whar we passed 'long ther base o' a ridge. Saul sw'ars that, lookin' up, he see'd Steve a-lookin' down, an' scowlin' like a pirit."

"Well, it makes little difference, either way, though I hardly believe he saw him."

"He says he's sure on't, an' he bids you take good care o' yerself. He sez Steve hates ye like mad, an' will throw ye cold ef he kin. Jest keep yer eyes open, lad."

Alf promised to heed the friendly warning, but in a few seconds he had forgotten all about Williams in thinking of what he considered a greater danger.

Nor was he mistaken; the action of the rain was loosening the snow on the side of the peak, and, unknown to the devoted band, a power was gathering which was not to be defied by man.

The foot-hills guide was the first to perceive the danger. Looking up the mountain-side he saw that there was motion at the top; it seemed that the whole mountain was moving there; and a white cloud came rolling down like an accumulation of ocean billows.

Even as Alf looked a warning cry arose from another of the men, and in a moment all was confusion. Captain Buck called to them to keep cool, but he might as well have addressed the deaf rocks. The instinct of self preservation is strong, and away went every man but Buck and Alf, running pell-mell for a cliff a hundred yards away.

The two persons last mentioned were left alone with Betha and Miss Violet.

Not a word passed the lips of any of the party—the women were too frightened, the men too brave, for that—but, as though by mutual consent, Alf clasped one arm around Betha's waist and Rainer did the same for his sister, and the race for life commenced.

Alf Browning retained his presence of mind, and he saw that though Betha was doing nobly they would fail to reach the cliff before the avalanche struck them.

To be overtaken meant death.

What could be done?

He glanced about almost in desperation, and saw that in their track were several pointed ledges which arose somewhat above the surface. These were, beyond doubt, so firmly fixed that they could not be removed. Only one question remained: Were they sufficiently high so that a person on top of them would be safe?

Even as Alf considered this point Captain Rainer shouted to him to seek that shelter, and he quickly decided to do so.

Speaking encouragingly to Betha he hastened up the rock, and none too soon. As they crouched on top the great mass of snow and debris came shooting down at race-horse speed.

Alf swung one arm around Betha's waist and awaited the result. Would it be life or death? No man could say then, for it was plain the mass would nearly, if not quite, reach the top of the ledge.

It was a moment of keen suspense.

On came the avalanche, nearer yet, and the imperiled persons held their breath.

A moment would decide all.

Then the avalanche struck and went shooting on furiously, but each heart grew lighter. Even Betha saw that though the snow reached to within three feet of the top of the rock, they were destined to escape.

A sudden cry from the girl, an instant later, caused the guide to look around, and as he followed the direction of her pointing finger he saw a man floating along with the avalanche, clinging to a mangled tree-top, his face the picture of desperation and horror.

Greatly surprised, Avalanche Alf recognized the victim of the snow-slide to be the mutineer chief, Steve Williams, but the view was but a brief one. The struggling form quickly disappeared in the mass of snow, rocks and trees, and they saw it no more.

The avalanche went thundering past, but, though loose portions of snow were flung upon the young guide and his charge, they remained uninjured, and a glance a little beyond showed that it was the same with Buck Rainer and his sister.

The quartette did not venture to move until the slide had exhausted its venom and dashed its bulk against the lower land. It left a nearly smooth surface behind, which was in most places as hard as snow could be, and when they arose and went on it was like treading on a pavement.

Captain Buck, greatly moved, embraced his daughter, and then they proceeded to the cliff, where they found the other miners nearer snowed-in than they had been. But no one was injured, and Rainer did not chide the men for running in a moment of such peril.

Greatly relieved, the party went on, and the foot of the peak was reached without further danger. On the way they had an unexpected discovery. The body of a man was seen lying bruised and lifeless on the snow, and when they turned it over they recognized Steve Williams, disfigured though he was.

His old comrades had repeatedly forgiven his evil deeds, but the Colorado snow-slide is merciless, and he died a deserved death in the mountains.

We might tell more about the journey of Rainer's party to the settlements, but as it was one of fatigue rather than danger, a brief summary will suffice.

That night the wind again changed, and the surface hardened, and on this support they went on with all possible speed. Avalanche Alf showed his skill as a guide, and as he was given full sway, he led them successfully.

When, at last, the houses of a town arose before them, he was voted a "trump card," but even this could not add to the enviable reputation he already enjoyed as a guide and man.

But Betha Rainer was saved, and her gratitude and that of Captain Buck pleased him so that he made no effort to hide it; for he had learned to think a good deal of pretty Betha.

All were glad to have escaped from the mountains. They often thought of the Horseshoe, filled, no one knew to what depth, with snow; of the barren Kettle's Rim; and of the other places so well known to them.

But it was not until another summer that they saw the place, and then the cabins were found crushed flat. It was well for them they escaped when they did.

And here our chronicle may well end, for, with the death of Steve Williams and Zeke Pratt's disappearance, all trouble from the mutineers ended.

During the last season Buck Rainer led another expedition to the heart of the mountains, and among the other men were Old Rat Rugg, Saul Lewis and Shine Tucker.

Alf Browning daily becomes more noted in his sturdy young State, and there is no knowing what honors are in store for him. But fate seems to forecast one thing plainly: Every one says he will soon take Betha Rainer as his wife.

And so we leave the foot-hills.

THE END.



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